



TWO 200

ADULT
READERS



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ONCE I START UPON ROLLING HILLS

BY DEKKER GRADEN



Illustrated by CARA MUTTON



The world turned, and turned once more, a jewel spinning in the depths of space. Emblazed on its soul, colors of blue, brown and gold. Upon its dark side, tendrils of light grew, spreading over the hard crust like a living thing. A garden that gave bloom to voices that called and chattered away at the night.

The world turned, then turned once more. The tendrils blossomed like flowers in the night. The voices cried out in triumph for the universe to hear. Then, at the height of their exultations, a terrible fear crept into their tone.

The world turned, then turned once more. The voices, now strong and powerful, cried to the night with hatred, fear, and self-doubt. They yelled to the stars a terrible curse, and soon thereafter flashes of fire burned out the tendrils wherever it touched. Now, quieter than before, the voices whimpered in pain and faded from the world.

The world turned, then turned once more. The light was gone and the world was quiet, spinning un-slowed in the depths of the dark. After centuries of sound, the quiet once anew ruled between stars.

Splres, faintly dusty red, leaped from the eastern horizon, as the fine ash far up in the atmosphere heralded the dawn. Like a cathedral, they arched overhead before the sun even dared peek over the ocean's vast expanse. The tortured soul of the sky embraced the fire's flickering glow before the sun's weak rays touched the island.

Nick looked far up at the torn sky, slowly shaking his head in wonder as he mumbled, "Damn. The whole war was almost worth it just for the sunrises." He hunkered down behind the battered remains of the lifeboat, chewing himself out for getting caught up in introspection. Dawn and the daytime to follow were filled with danger for those unwary enough to stay near the beach. It was during the day that the Walkers came to lounge on the rocky shore of the island to soak up what pitiful warmth the sun could provide.

Quickly, he went back to work prying the last oar hook out of the lifeboat's polymer rail with the short claws on his furry hands. He set each hook on a tattered sailor's shirt that he tied up into a carryall and picked up a crude spear he'd made out of a crooked long stick. Dawn was here and he had to leave before the Walkers found him. His oversized feet made short work of the rocky shoreline as he leaped from boulder to stone, his footpads blunting the sharp edges of the rocks for him.

The keep was a mile away, but the rough overland trek past twisted and charred pines made it easily twice as far for him. The trunks of the stunted pines were long warped by the never-ending wind, while the needles were discolored and burnt from the many firestorms that washed over the island from the mainland not sixty miles to the east.

Later, Nick rested on two mounds of small rocks that were the only markers of the two humans who had been with Proxima and him when they came to this place. Both had died shortly after landing. He strained his eyes up the slope for the pile of rocks that marked what he called the keep. Not for the first time did he envy Proxima's better eyesight. Her vertical-slit eyes gave her fantastic vision at night and the ability to spot anything that moved during the day.

While he rested, his hand moved of its own accord down to his shorts and tugged at the waistband, which was chafing his fur again. Not for the first time did he wonder why they hadn't just engineered him furless. He bent one of his ridiculously long ears over so that he could look up at it with a glare, as if daring it to even exist. "Trapped on this fucking rock with a cat!" he muttered. "Murphy's Law playing games with me again. Why couldn't it have been Jessy?"

Moments later he set off again for the keep, but paused, looking at the graves and then the spectacular sunrise beyond. His eyes scanned the empty water out to the horizon, looking for their ship. It might have still been afloat, one side blistered black from the near miss. He stared at the graves for another minute then muttered softly, "Not many of you left anymore."

The keep was little more than a pile of rocks with weathered sea-bleached wood piled on top, forming a crude roof. It had proven itself time and time again against the elements and the occasional walker that made it that far up onto the island. It crouched on the island's one large hill, overlooking the western cliffs.

He slipped into the sheltering stones that had become his home and peered around in the murky interior. How he had come to call this place *home* escaped him, but for him that is what it now was. He called out.

"Hey Proxima! You home yet?"

Only silence gave answer. The single room of the keep was dim and quiet, Nick went farther in and glanced about for Proxima, trying to spot her gold and yellow hide within the drab den. She was prone to sleeping long hours.

"Hey...Proxy? Are you here?"

Hints of gold shadow shifted above Nick's head and then detached and dropped with a light whisper of paws and legs behind him. Paws wrapped around him from behind, and he felt sharp claws brushing the fur on his neck. Nick's heart beat with the force of his fear and adrenalin. In the stillness, his ears rang with a quiet whisper.

"Gotcha Nick."

Proxima's body was smooth-furred and yellow-brown in color, with many small black spots scattered all over. It pressed close to him, and he felt her every movement.

Nick raged inside as the fear faded enough for him to express other emotions, and he struggled out of Proxima's embrace, teeth gnawing together. He was half in shock with conflicting instincts, and the scents of his fear and anger mixed in the air.

"How...How dare you! God damn you! How dare you do that!" fumed Nick, just barely able to catch his breath.

Proxima looked for the world like a wounded dog. How a cat was able to pull that off while he watched her was a bit of a mystery to him. "I'm sorry Nick," she said. "It's just that I like to pounce things, and there just isn't anyone else to pounce here." She looked forlornly back at the oversized hare.

Nick glared at Proxima for a moment longer, and then he burst out laughing, the stress from the long night washing away. It had been three months since their lifeboat had washed ashore, driven by the daemon winds that howled across the sea from the war-torn mainland. Of the four people that had landed, only Proxima and he had lived. Now they were becoming friends out of necessity in the midst of their isolation.

The journey back to Obernoff should have been a simple affair after Nick's first mainland visit. Before that trip he had never spoken more than a few words to Proxima. The other people on the ship, humans, had never encouraged them to talk with one another. Preoccupied with their ideas of species destiny, they had given little thought of bringing Proxima and him together.

"Are you hungry Nick?" Proxima asked, her tone quieter than normal. "I found some wild grain and some fresh tubers." She reached down and picked up a ragged cloth from the floor. It was the remnants of her clothing, put to use as a sack. She had taken to nudity now, her soft coat of fur keeping her plenty warm in this climate.

She opened the cloth, exposing the meager collection of wilted tubers within, and Nick could only smile. What food there was on the island

was monotonous and ever harder to find. He was lucky to have Proxima as a friend. "You're right," he said. "I am hungry. What did you get for yourself?"

Proxima handed the rag to Nick. "I was able to catch some fish for myself," she replied, picking up another greasy sack with fish wrapped up snugly inside.

Nick cocked his ear to the side and grinned at the fish. "We need to talk about the Walkers," he said. "They're getting bolder every week. I saw more of them on the beach this morning, and they're coming farther inland to sun than before."

Three months ago, when they first landed on the island, the Walkers had already been introduced. At the time they were little more than large crabs, only they never stopped growing, getting ever larger as the weeks passed. The bright red shells were like fire, with claws like massive curved scythes. Maybe they were someone's bio-weapon, let loose on the world to do damage to shorelines and ports, or some equally strange story. It mattered little where they came from though, as the Walkers took more of the island for themselves every week.

Proxima crouched down into a defensive posture, her tail twitching back and forth playfully. "The keep should keep them out. And even if they make it here we can just push them over the cliff and crack their shells open. I bet they'd taste good, after having only fish for three months," she said with a smirk on her animal face, whiskers forward. The engineers that had made her gave far more mobility to her face than her genetic ancestors.

With a nod, Nick accepted that. "I hope so," he replied. "If they get all of the way up here, I just hope that the walls will hold."

They settled down on the hard-packed dirt floor and worked at the meager meals. The tubers made soft crunching sounds between Nick's teeth while Proxima stripped the skin off of her two small fish and ate them raw.

Nick looked up from his meal and said, "I picked up the oar hooks this morning. We can use them on the tower lashings today. Having

a fire at night might bring in a passing ship." Under his breath, so Proxima couldn't hear, he added, "Or a quick death if it's a Protectorate, and not a Union, ship."

Proxima nodded. "Aye, the sooner we have that working the sooner we can be rescued. Let's go!"

"Right now?"

She gulped down the last of her meal and dragged out the few tools they had salvaged from the lifeboat or had been able to make on their own.

"Yes. Right now."

Nick put aside his thoughts about who might rescue them and followed Proxima. The tower was up a crude path through the underbrush towards the edge of the westernmost cliffs. It overlooked the sea for miles in every direction, standing out in the new morning sun like a primitive lighthouse.

"All we have is another level to go. With the oar hooks we might be able to finish today."

Proxima nodded her agreement, and they both started toward their work.

Nick headed for the ladder leading up the middle of the tower, while Proxima, keeping touch with her cat nature (as she was fond of telling him), extended her claws and climbed up the side of the tower. She easily beat him to the top, slipping over the edge with feline grace.

Proxima waited, crouched down and ready to pounce just behind the trap door. She watched as first Nick's ears and then his shoulders and chest came up through the hole. Her tail lashed silently back and forth across the tower's unfinished struts. As soon as he climbed free and was about to turn and face her, she leapt!

With a flop, Proxima landed on Nick's shoulders, her mouth near his oversized ears.

"Gotcha! Betcha! Missed ya! What keptcha?"

"Get off! Crazy cat. We've got to finish this tower tonight! Walkers, remember?"

Proxima smiled, running her paw, claws extended and scratching, up along Nick's thigh. She smirked in that feline way as they went through his fur from the waistline of his shorts down to his knee.

"Hey, you're just jealous that I beat you up here."

With a quiet sigh, Nick accepted the touch of claws into his fur. Over the last few months he had found that her physical playfulness filled a desperate need in him for contact with another.

"Sure, sure, whatever you say. Now can we start? Please?"

With a grin spreading over her face, Proxima nodded. "Sure thing. You're the big boss wabbit here."


Rolling his eyes, Nick set to work on the tower's battlements with Proxima soon behind him. They dragged the brazier up the side of the tower; it was the parabolic dish that they had salvaged from their grounded boat, and they used the oar hooks to mount it in place on the tower struts. The radio had been a loss and would never be used to communicate on the airwaves again. Besides, most if not all the satellites were gone now, fried to a crisp by the bombs that had been used. The two worked for most of the day installing the signal fire brazier, putting the dish to one last task of communication.

While they were working, the eastern horizon turned a dark and ominous red, spreading from one horizon to the other with a fitful but indistinct glow. It glittered softly in the early evening sun, setting over the burned-out mainland to the east.

"Look, Nick!" Proxima shouted, pointing to the north with a finger. "Isn't it just beautiful?"

Looking up, Nick swore. "Shit! Another fire-storm! Let's get back home for the night."

The tower would be useless that night; the storm would mask any fire that could be set. He fastened down one more brace and then headed



"Look, Nick!" Proxima shouted, pointing to the north with a finger. "Isn't it just beautiful?"

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for the ladder, only to stop short at a sharp pain in his ear.

"Proxy! Let go!"

"We haven't had a real firestorm in over a week, Nicky. You know it'll only be another smoke and lightning one. You know it!"

She dug her claws into his ear and dragged him over to the eastern edge of the tower. With her other hand she held his chin and made him look north at the approaching glitter.

"Don't you see? We've got at least fifteen minutes before it gets here. It'll take us what? Five to reach shelter?" She looked at Nick and a playful grin spread over her muzzle. Her eyes danced across his face.

Nick tried to pull his head out of her grasp. "Stop playing games," he demanded. "That firestorm will be here soon." He looked out of the corner of his eye at Proxima. "There's no one here to help us if we get caught outside of the shelter and burned. We can't afford to take chances."

The sky was aflame with orange tendrils stretching overhead like the arms of an octopus in the throes of agony. The air had turned thick with the smell of burnt ozone. After a few moments of sniffing the air, Proxima let Nick's

head go and danced to the side. "At least admit that it's beautiful!" she said, looking to the approaching storm. "Why even be alive if you can't see that?"

The knuckles on Nick's paws were white from anger as he gripped the rail. He looked up at the sky. "It is rather...impressive," he carefully admitted, a panicked look growing in his eyes as the storm neared. "Can we go now?"

Sighing, Proxima watched the coming storm with a soft playful grin on her face. The raging tempest was truly a grand sight. "Where's your sense of adventure?" she asked. Standing on top of the watchtower as the storm approached filled her with a grand sense of life. She dared the world to come and kill her, but Nick was already going down the ladder, so she baled over the side of the tower and followed. At the bottom, she let him lead her down the trail to the keep, hand in hand.

"C'mon, Proxy...please."

"Maybe the storms aren't as dangerous as you think."

The feeling of daring still filled her heart. She playfully batted at one of his ears as he pulled her down the trail at a fast pace.

When next she looked up at the storm, it was much closer than it had been before. It was coming to them faster than she had thought, the sea's scale having tricked her eye. She didn't fight Nick now and broke into a trot next to him.

The air around them grew dim and orange even as the storm pushed overhead. The weak offerings of the sun faded under the storm's angry, surging clouds. Proxima dashed on ahead of Nick and threw open the door to the keep.

With lashing tendrils of fiery dust and ash the storm arrived. The hot particles whipped against Nick's fur as he took off at a run to reach the keep. Within moments he was in through the door.

Desperately, Proxima tried to push the doorway shut after him, only the howling wind outside caught the door just right and snatched it out of her paws, flinging her to the floor. Bruised, her ears ringing from wind and pressure, she desperately huddled between two boulders and waited for the storm to abate enough so that she could close the door.

Thinking of Nick, Proxima looked around frantically, unable to see him anywhere within the shelter. She called out to him over the sound of the raging storm outside while the air inside began to fill with corrosive smog.

The light inside the keep faded to a dim and ghostly red, and Proxima's lungs were starting to make strong and persistent complaints about the soup she was feeding them. Her eyes burned and were slowly swelling shut with irritation as she saw a vague shape push its painful way against the whipping maelstrom by the entrance.

Her breathing became ever more labored, her eyesight dimmed, and the walls closed in around her as she passed out on the hard-packed earth, asphyxiated. The firestorm had burned all the oxygen away.

Later, as the blackness receded in Proxima's mind, she heard Nick asking, "Prox. Can you hear me? Proxima..." Her head ached with almost blinding pain that throbbed like the bombs

she had seen flashing over the mainland three months ago.

Reaching for her temple, she found it already in Nick's grasp, his paw softly touching just above her eyes. She opened them and looked up at him. "What happened, I..." Gazing into the face hovering over her own, she stuttered to a stop.

Beheld before her eyes: the glowing image of Nicky, softly pink around the edges from the open doorway. That glow was common after firestorms passed by, leaving everything bathed in their light. He was the most wondrous sight that she had ever seen. His face radiated kindness, caring, and love. The soft, moist-looking eyes snared her with their concerned, wet, worried look.

"The firestorm is over Proxy. I opened the door to let in some air. It was getting stale."

Proxima reached up to him with both arms, her paws wrapping around his neck loosely. It had been three lonely months on the island, and her mind no longer was completely sane. The fur on the back of his neck stood on end when her paws wrapped around his shoulders, but he ignored it and went on.

"Glad to see that you made it. I was really worried for you. You were out like stone."

Slowly, Proxima grinned. It was the same Nicky that she had come to know—had always known. He was talking too much, so she pulled his head down to her and kissed him passionately. She expected him to pull away, like the other times, but much to her surprise, he didn't resist. More than that, he responded to her kiss with one of his own. He pressed his warm body against her, and their eyes dug deep into each other's soul.

For a full three months they had been on the island, and with the constant disruptions and dangers she had lost track of time. It

had been three months since she took the last suppressant. Three months of long lonely hell. As she kissed Nick, it came to her. It was her time now. Her body was ready and her glands were releasing hormones. Her scent was just right to catch the attention of any male of her species around. Only there were none.

Even an intelligent cat can have trouble resisting certain natural urges when circumstances are so right for giving into them. Claws extended, she dug into his fur, clutching him into her, and they kissed, the kiss holding and filling their world with wondrous delight. Her tail twitched out behind her in anticipation for something "very much" like a pounce.

Blinking back his initial surprise at the speed of her passion, Nick gripped her shoulders with his fists, grabbing her skin between his fingers with a tight grip. Proxima was definitely pretty, and the time they had spent alone made it difficult—no, needless—for him to resist her sudden desire.

His paws held her, feeling the smooth musculature underneath the rippling soft yellow fur with each shiver of her body. He gasped for breath in unison with her when they finally finished the kiss, both taking in each other's scents. He knew now. He knew her scent for what it was.

Nick pulled back,
turning his
head

away when she tried to meet her muzzle to his own. He tried to plead with her, despite their labored breathing.

"Proxy, I want this. I really do, but you're in heat and I wouldn't want to force it on you."

His own scent was strong in his nose, both its fear and lust. His body was already responding to her, his sheath filling out with his member so that it was firm against her.

Proxima snarled at Nick like some primal beast and dug her claws into his back with all her strength, tearing into his flesh as she pulled him to her, letting him know exactly what she wanted without words muddling the meaning of her passion.

With another snarl, Proxima divested Nick of his shorts, her claws making short work of the tattered cloth. The sound of ripping cloth made Nick back away from her, but the intensity of her need washed away any doubt he had. Once the



cloth was free of his hips and legs, his erection grew unhindered by the waistband.

Aroused by the feel of her claws against his back, by the warmth of her body before him, and by a need that had to be filled despite the pain Nick quivered. His own claws gripped into her with his own need. Holding her. Giving to her all that he had been denied for months.

Her strong scent permeated the room enough to drive males of her race mad with lust. The two separated for a moment and simply took each other in. Proxima's fur had taken on an almost electric sheen along her chest, tummy, and loins, and a hard pink erection had grown in contrast to Nick's soft, white belly fur.

"RAAOOOWRRR!" Proxima snarl-hissed, "C'mere, you!" The civilized intelligence behind her eyes was almost completely gone now, the lower part of her mind having been taken over with pure primal drive.

Nick snarled himself, his two massive teeth glinting in the pale light. "Come get me. Take me. Pounce me!" He gripped at her shoulders savagely with his paws, digging his claws into her skin with his lust.

With a flick of her tongue Proxima licked her nose, wetting it down to better take in all of Nick's scents. She glanced down his body, eyes burning with a feral feline ferocity that just growled. She could smell his fear, his lust, and his wanting. He was only a foot away, her prey, and her prize.

She pounced, knocking Nick over with her strength and pinning him down on his back. She dug her claws into his shoulders and held him fast. Spreading her hips open over him, she let go of his shoulders and raked her claws over his chest and sides. Her face was close to his and her breath played through his whiskers when she mounted him, pushing herself down onto his welcoming erection.

Nick yelled as he thrust up into her, her claws scratching along his sides every time he moved, digging into his belly with sharp barbs. The pain, the pleasure, and the ecstatic feel of her left his face contorted.

Together, they rutted like animals, biting, scratching, and snarling with desperation and desire, as if they were trying to reclaim everything that humans had taken away. Innocent to the world it seemed. They held each other, clutched each other, gripped each other with deep unfulfilled longing, and thrust recklessly into each other, their bodies moving together, and their claws drawing parallel lines of blood.

As climax came upon Proxima, she screeched in pleasure. The smell of his blood and her own scent overcame her sentient mind. Engineered and created by man, but still just the animal she was patterned after, she reverted to her primal self and grabbed Nick's throat in her teeth. Her powerful jaws sunk deep into his flesh.

In a frenzy of pain and terror, Nick clawed at Proxima's neck. Yet her teeth only sank deeper into his throat despite his frantic attempts to claw her off. He bucked wildly under her, unable to gasp for breath. Out of his mouth, specks of blood and phlegm spit forth.

A mixture of lust and long hunger fueled her drive, and when she tasted the free flow of blood from Nick's severed jugular, she lifted her head to the ceiling and let loose a yowl of victory for the kill. Under her, Nick died with a shudder, having drowned in his own blood from his ripped-out throat. The life that had been in his eyes moments before disappeared, his face forever trapped in a disturbing mask of pleasure and pain.

Proxima began to feed on her kill. Many hours passed before the engineered parts of her mind once again took hold...



A dark silhouette

stood out against the reddening sky, casting a long shadow across the beach from a sun that was low on the horizon. A storm was fast approaching the island, but the figure did not stir, acting as if carved from a single stone. Its appearance seemed fragile, and it looked as if pieced together from the bleached fragments that occasionally alighted on the blighted shore.

The tempest over the water howled angrily, and the blood red sun was illuminated with lightning that cut harsh streaks out of the solid cruel darkness and mindless yet still alive in its own way it rushed towards the only soul on the beach.

The figure closed her eyes, muzzle peering out of closed eyes at the storm that came she could hear its heartbeats vital and powerful a sound that she craved for having ignored the other beast that she had shared the ravaged island with so long ago.

Or was it ventrals? She honestly couldn't remember.

The gaunt figure that took a step forward as the roaring beast nearer it hadn't penetrated her flesh & vibrations starting her soul to shiver and powerless stance proclaiming dominance over all that it surveyed. She'd heard the call of that beast before, but never understood before now. It was her accursed heart out and the terrible knowledge of what she had done.

The wave front of the storm crashed down from the clouds toward her. The full brunt of its power seemed to home in on the bleak figure who now stood with her arms held starkly outwards. Her body was laid on the tattered remains of a hide that had once been a sapient mind. In her hands she felt had rudely carved rivers down from the bones of the one she had loved, and carved into the shapes the storm had told her it desired. She ached in the beast and it came.

A towering ball of flame smashed her into the beach her scalding plumes of steam rising into the sky and blasting the sea floor bare a nightmare version of Moses parting the Red Sea. The breath of her unholy god rushed with the spread of thought onto the desecrated beach.

With a surge she leaped into its embrace to be consumed in its mass. Her love or the beast fixed her with need and she disappeared into its flames & heat. She would soon be with her over again.

When it passed, her blackened and burnt remains fell to the ground and she rested at last.

The firestorm swept over the island and back into the sea. The world turned then turned once more. The ruins of what once was felt to the earth to rumble. Not a trace was left to the ages. Not a soul to weep for its loss.



FLIRT!

By Leo Magna

YOU KNOW

ONE OF THE MOST
IMPORTANT LESSONS
IN LIFE I LEARNED
FROM HIM

HE MIGHT NOT EVEN
REALIZE IT.

PROBABLY NEVER
WILL, EITHER

HIS NAME IS MARK HALLDALE...



FOOTBALL PLAYER EXTRAORDINAIRE



Mark Halldale



Andre

VOTED CLASS FLIRT WHEN HE GRADUATED

HEY HALDALE, HAVE FUN STARING AT
ALL THE PRETTY NAKED BOYS?

IF YOU'RE
REFERRING TO
YOURSELF,

THEN
I'VE HAD
BETTER
TIMES AT
THE
DENTIST.

SEE YOU AT PRACTICE BERNARD
HOPE YOU HAVE A FUN TIME UNTIL THEN...
BY THE WAY, I'LL TELL THE GIRLS YOU SAID "HI"

YEAH YEAH WHATEVER.

I SWEAR YOU'RE THE BIGGEST CLOSET
CASE I KNOW I BET YOU ENJOY THESE
NAKED SHOWERS MORE THAN I DO

SNORT

YOU HAVE A PROBLEM WITH ME
HALDALE? BRING IT

YOU KNOW
YOU CAN'T
TOUCH
ME

IF YOU SO MUCH AS SCRATCH ME THE TEAM
WILL HAVE YOUR HEAD SIDES I THINK
YOU'RE JUST UPSET BECAUSE ALL THE
CHEERLEADERS WANT TO JUMP THIS GAY
BOY'S BONES MORE THAN YOUR SORRY TAIL

YOU'RE SO COCKY HALDALE

CHUCKLE

FOR YOUR THEORY TO BE CORRECT I'D
HAVE TO LIKE MEN, AND THE ONLY WAY I
LIKE MEN IS WHEN I'M GRINDING THEM
INTO THE GRASS OUT ON THE FIELD

BAH
THAT JUST
MEANS
YOU'RE
INTO
S&M

WHATEVER.

HE ALWAYS TAKES
HIS TIME -
NEVER EARLY.
ALWAYS
FASHION-
ABLY
LATE



LOCKER
ROOM

DO YOU ALWAYS HAVE TO DO THAT TO
THE POOR GUY?
HE ALREADY HAS IT
HARD ENOUGH
BEING THE NEW
GUY ON
THE TEAM



YOU'RE SUCH A DICK
SURE, I TAUGHT YOU THAT,
BUT THERE ARE LIMITS
YOU KNOW



NO, -JUST
A COUPLE OF
HOURS



HEY THERE JOEY
BEEN WAITING
LONG?

BERNARD WAS TRYING
TO GIVE ME A HARD TIME
HAD TO REMIND HIM WHO'S TOP CAT

OH WHATEVER SOCCER-GIRL DON'T TELL
ME YOU'RE BEGINNING TO GROW A
HEART YOU'RE THE ONE WHO
TAUGHT ME NEVER TO
HOLD ANYTHING BACK

MEN'S
SOCKER
←

ANYWAYS,
YOU COMING
OR NOT?

FINE, OKAY
NOW YOU COMING
OR NOT?
I'VE STUFF TO SEE
AND FURS TO DO



HEY! DON'T LEAVE ME BEHIND! HOW RUDE!

LOOK AT THEM, PRANCING AROUND MERRILY

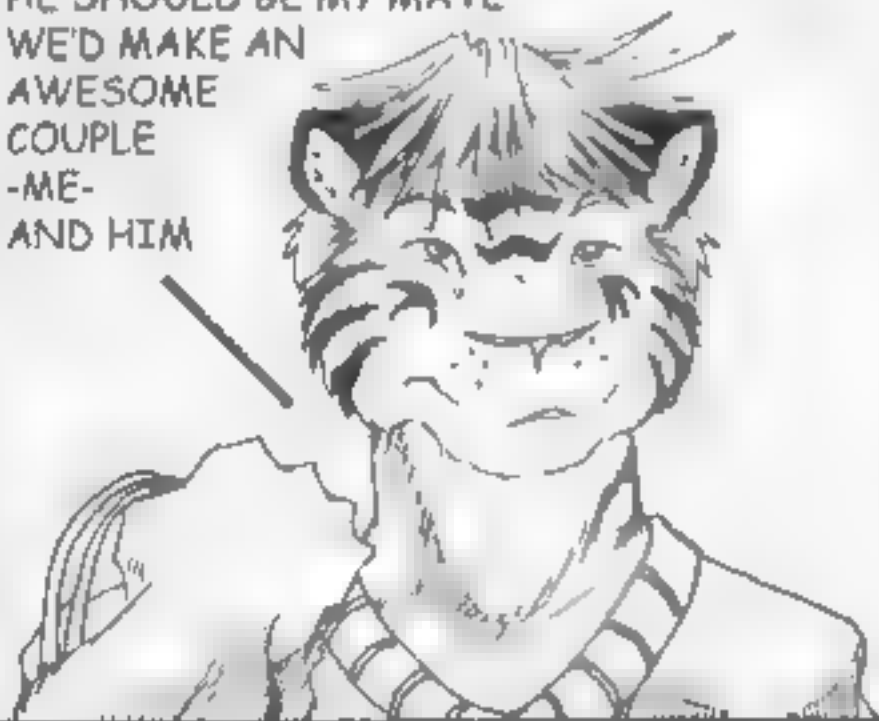
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

THEM, WELL, SAETTO
I SHOULD BE THE
ONE WALKING AROUND
WITH HIM.

WE WERE HITTING IT OFF UNTIL
THAT DOG CAME ALONG. I CAN'T
FIGURE OUT WHAT HE SEES IN HIM.
SAETTO'S WAY BETTER LOOKING,
MORE POPULAR, WEALTHY...



HE SHOULD BE MY MATE
WE'D MAKE AN
AWESOME
COUPLE
-ME-
AND HIM



ME AND HIM? DO I DETECT A TAD BIT OF
JEALOUSY? WHY, I NEVER THOUGHT I'D
SEE THE DAY YOU TURNED GREEN



SHUT UP!
SO WHAT
IF I'M A BIT
JEALOUS?

I SHOULDN'T HAVE TO ENVY SOMETHING
THAT SHOULD'VE BEEN MINE IN THE
FIRST PLACE

YOU PLAN TO WIN HIM BACK?
TOUGH LUCK! WHAT CHANCE
DO YOU THINK YOU
HAVE OF GETTING
HIM NAKED
WITH YOU
AGAIN?



HAH!

SIMPLE
I KNOW
WHERE HE
GOES TO RELAX
A BATH-HOUSE
I WON'T EVEN NEED
TO CONVINCE HIM
TO STRIP FOR ME
HE'LL ALREADY BE NAKED
I DO THE REST



OH WHAT LUCK. IT SEEMS WE'RE
THE ONLY ONES IN THE SAUNA
COULDN'T HAVE ASKED FOR
ANYTHING BETTER
JUST ME AND HIM.



THE ONLY THING
MISSING IS
ROMANTIC
CANDLES
NO MATTER.
I GUESS THIS
WILL HAVE
TO DO



HEY SAETTO.
TAKING A
QUICK NAP?

HUH?



OH HALLDALE
LONG TIME
NO SEE

HALLDALE?
WHAT'S UP
WITH THAT?

WELL, UNLESS MY MEMORY DECEIVES ME,
THAT IS YOUR NAME, RIGHT? WOULDN'T WANT
TO START CALLING YOU SOMETHING ELSE

NO, YEAH, THAT IS
MY NAME I JUST LIKED
IT BETTER WHEN YOU
CALLED ME MARK.

IF THAT'S WHAT YOU
WANT, THEN MARK IT IS
ANYHOW, I HAVEN'T SEEN YOU
AROUND HERE BEFORE. IS THIS
YOUR FIRST VISIT?

I DON'T COME BY OFTEN,
AND WHEN I DO IT'S
EARLY IN THE MORNING

WELL, NICE
TO SEE YOU
AGAIN. IT'S
BEEN WHAT,
TWO, THREE
MONTHS
SINCE WE
LAST
TALKED?

YEAH EVER
SINCE YOU
WERE TAKEN
OFF THE
"SINGLES"
LIST

AND YOU
LOVE HIM?
THAT DOG?

WELL
YES.

I'M SORRY DID I BRING UP A
TOUCHY SUBJECT?

MUST
BE THE
STEAM.

SAY,
SINCE
YOUR
DOG
ISN'T
HERE AT
THE MOMENT

OH, RIGHT
WHAT CAN I SAY?
I GOT LUCKY AND FOUND
A MATE WHO LOVES ME

I DON'T SUPPOSE
YOU MIND IF I
MAKE MYSELF
COMFORTABLE?

CAN I TAKE
YOUR MIND
OFF THINGS
FOR A WHILE?

Um...





WAIT... STOP...
THIS ISN'T RIGHT...



I SAID STOP

STOP? DON'T YOU WANT ME?
ISN'T THIS WHAT YOU WANT?

NO...

WHY?
ARE YOU NOT
FEELING
WELL?

NO

IT DOESN'T FEEL RIGHT.
THIS IS CHEATING, AND
I JUST CAN'T DO THAT TO HIM



WHO CARES?
HE DOESN'T HAVE
TO KNOW

BUT -I- WOULD KNOW,
AND I COULDN'T BEAR
TO LOOK AT HIM AND
REMEMBER THIS



SIGH
WE HAD A
FIGHT TODAY,
BUT THAT
DOESN'T MEAN
HE NO LONGER
LOVES ME.

HE'S ALWAYS
BEEN THERE
FOR ME, AND
IN THE END
THAT'S WHAT
COUNTS.

I CAN'T DO
THIS TO HIM,
NOT WITHOUT
HATING MYSELF.
IT'S NOT
WORTH IT.



PRETTY INSPIRATIONAL, BUT I STILL
DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY YOU STOPPED.
SO YOU LOVE HIM. BIG
DEAL, IF HE REALLY
LOVES YOU BACK HE
SHOULDN'T CARE.

BESIDES, YOU'RE
TOO GOOD FOR
HIM ANYWAY



BUT -I- WOULD KNOW,
AND I COULDN'T BEAR
TO LOOK AT HIM AND
REMEMBER THIS



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SHOULDN'T CARE.

BESIDES, YOU'RE
TOO GOOD FOR
HIM ANYWAY



SORRY HALDALE
YOU'VE GOT IT
ALL WRONG
IT'S NOT
ABOUT
"WHO'S
THE
BEST",
BUT HOW
MUCH
WE CARE
ABOUT
EACH
OTHER
HE
WOULD
NEVER
CHEAT
ON ME,
EVEN
IN A
CASE
LIKE
THIS

I DON'T UNDERSTAND!
WHAT DOES HE HAVE THAT
I DON'T?

IT'S NOT LIKE THAT
LET ME PUT IT THIS WAY.
WHEN I'M SEVENTY AND
WRINKLY HE WON'T CARE...

BECAUSE HE
WOULD STILL
LOVE ME

BECAUSE LOVE
IS ABOUT
MUCH MORE
THAN GOOD
LOOKS AND
POPULARITY

I STILL DON'T GET IT
IF YOU LOVE HIM, WHY CAN'T
YOU LOVE ME? HOW IS HE
BETTER THAN ME?

HE'S NOT BUT
THAT'S WHAT
YOU DON'T
UNDERSTAND
I LOVE
MY DOG
THAT IS
WHY I'M
LEAVING
MAYBE YOU
DON'T
SEE IT
NOW

BUT MAYBE SOMEDAY, WHEN YOU
FIND SOMEONE WHO WILL LOVE
YOU AND WANT YOU NO MATTER
WHAT HAPPENS

THEN MAYBE YOU WILL UNDERSTAND WHY I LEFT
YOU'RE A GREAT GUY IN YOUR OWN WAY, HALDALE
I'M SURE THAT YOUR OTHER HALF IS OUT THERE,
AND I WISH YOU LUCK IN FINDING IT BUT AS FOR ME,
I HAVE A DOG WAITING AT HOME - A SAD DOG THAT
I NEED TO MAKE HAPPY

AS I SAW HIM ON THE
FLOOR, I REALIZED THAT
AT ONE POINT IN THE
PAST THAT WAS ME,
SEARCHING DESPERATELY
FOR THAT FEELING THAT
I WAS MISSING,
REPEATING OVER AND
OVER IN MY MIND THE
WORDS OF THE
EVER-SO-WISE ROCK
GROUP "QUEEN":

"SOMEBODY FIND ME
SOMEBODY TO LOVE"

ADIOS,
HALDALE
SEE YOU
AROUND

GOODBYE SAETTO...

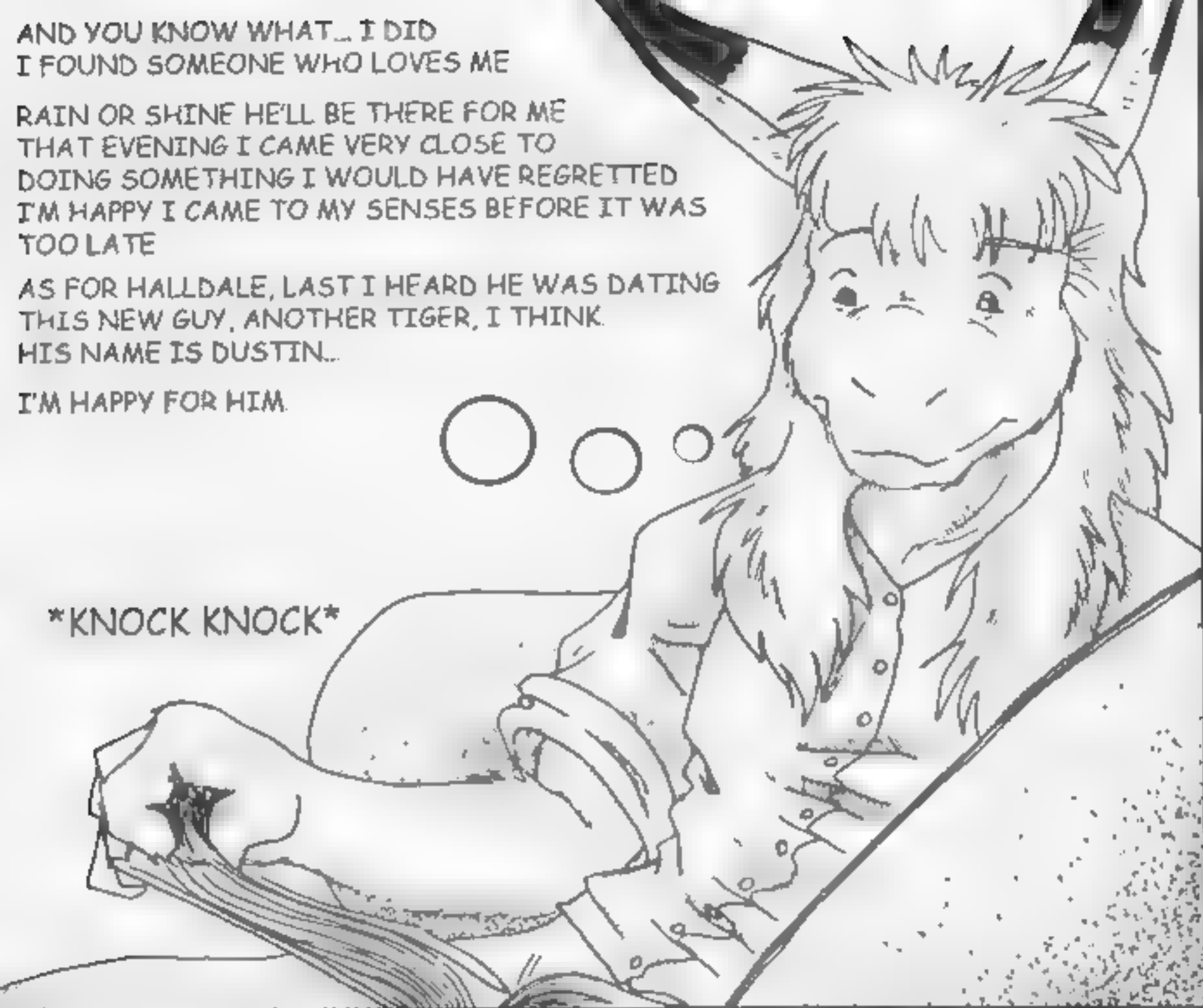
AND YOU KNOW WHAT... I DID
I FOUND SOMEONE WHO LOVES ME

RAIN OR SHINE HE'LL BE THERE FOR ME
THAT EVENING I CAME VERY CLOSE TO
DOING SOMETHING I WOULD HAVE REGRETTED
I'M HAPPY I CAME TO MY SENSES BEFORE IT WAS
TOO LATE

AS FOR HALLDALE, LAST I HEARD HE WAS DATING
THIS NEW GUY, ANOTHER TIGER, I THINK.
HIS NAME IS DUSTIN.

I'M HAPPY FOR HIM.

KNOCK KNOCK



HEY
THERE
HANDSOME
WHAT ARE
YOU UP TO
TONIGHT?



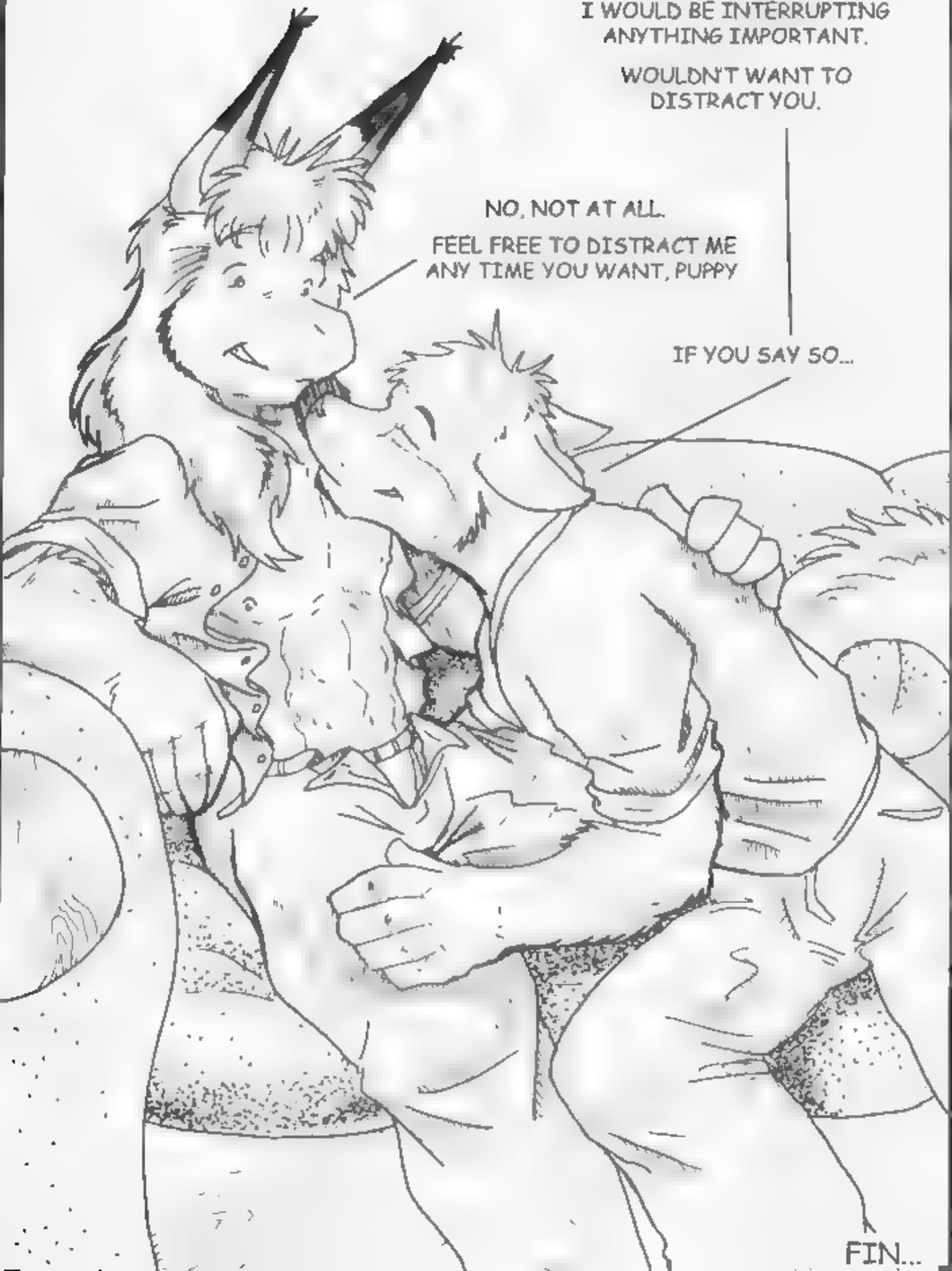
OH, NOTHING IMPORTANT,
JUST SIFTING THROUGH
MY OLD YEARBOOK
WHY DO ASK?

JUST WANTED TO KNOW IF
I WOULD BE INTERRUPTING
ANYTHING IMPORTANT.

WOULDN'T WANT TO
DISTRACT YOU.

NO, NOT AT ALL.
FEEL FREE TO DISTRACT ME
ANY TIME YOU WANT, PUPPY

IF YOU SAY SO...



FIN...

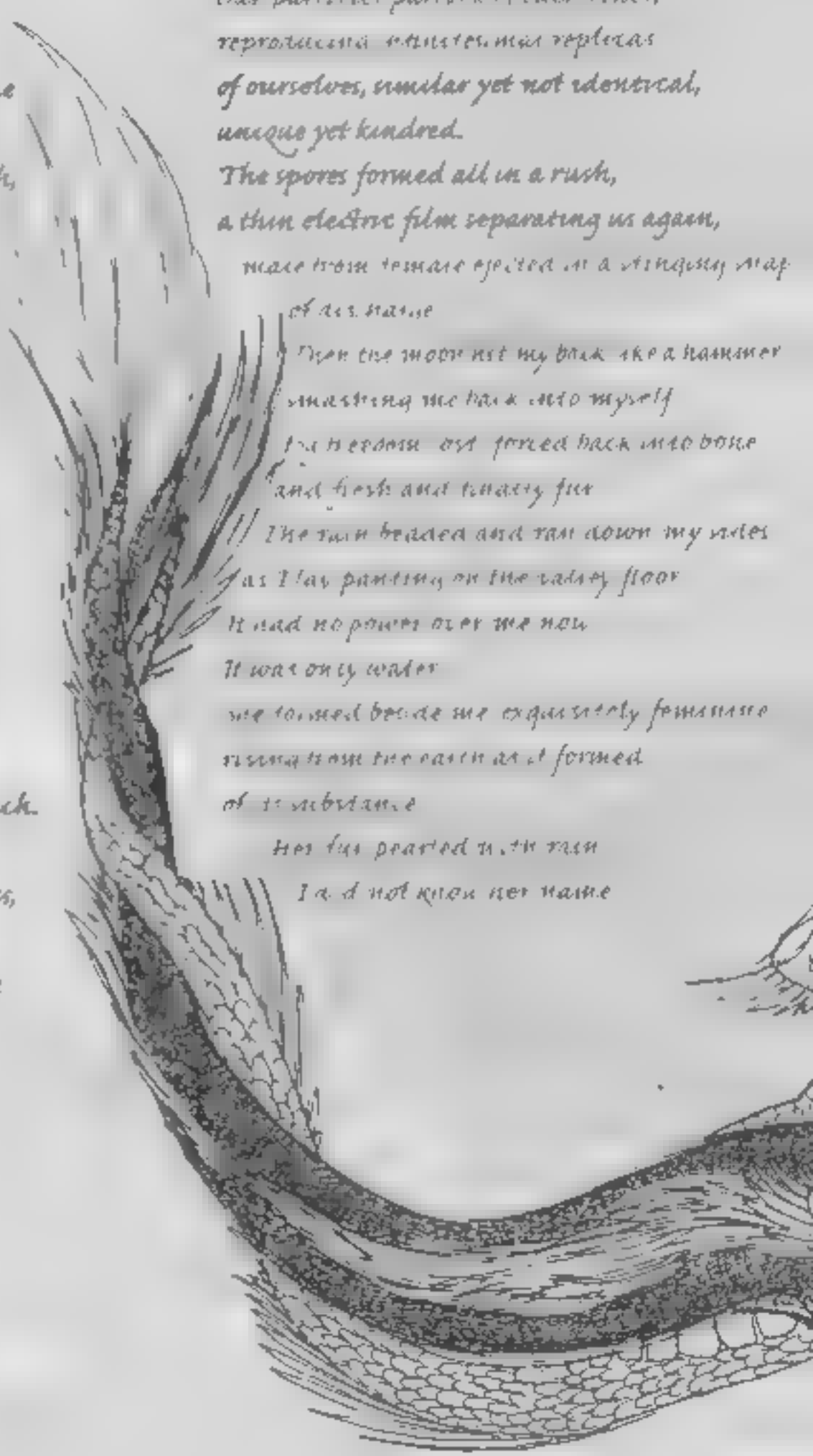
Moonstruck

by Sheela Ardrian

I raised my head to the rain
and let it wash me away
The breeding season was ending
+ was time to disperse
Tonight might be my last chance
My burrow lay warm and dry behind me
I did not look back at it
First my fur melted, and then my flesh,
finally my bones, releasing me
into breath + form at last
Like mist I drifted over the landscape
The cool moonlight went through me
in shaft after shaft of energy
I became darkness, then I jumped
+ appeared within the females
I flowed over the valley floor
They would be there
on the earth
as I in the air
I tasted her first
with a sense that was not flavor
felt her with something other than touch.
My mating senses became acute,
sharpening to her sweetness, her softness,
that was neither sweet nor soft
but something unnamed and necessary.
I pressed myself against the ground
and it gave way, her essence
simultaneously pressing up
against me.

I entered her - she enfolded me - we
hovered there between earth and air
for a timeless time
Our particles partook of each other,
reproducing intricate, mirroring replicas
of ourselves, similar yet not identical,
unique yet kindred.
The spores formed all in a rush,
a thin electric film separating us again,
male from female ejected in a stinging map
of air + time
Then the moon hit my back like a hammer
smashing me back into myself
The essence lost forced back into bone
and flesh and tawny fur
The rain beaded and ran down my sides
as I lay panting on the valley floor
It had no power over me now
It was only water
we formed beside me exquisitely feminine
rising from the earth as it formed
of its substance

Her fur peeped with rain
I did not know her name



I had not even seen her in the mating dance
two long weeks ago but something
in me had sensed at long last another
to match my patience.

It was dangerous to wait for the last rain,
to run the risk of missing a season
when the mating time came so rarely,
but the reward outweighed the risk
for the daring.

I cupped her muzzle in mine,
gentle teeth kissing
her out of the brood-stupor.

We lifted our heads together
and saw our spawn spread out
along the valley as far as eye could see,
like a smear of starlight.



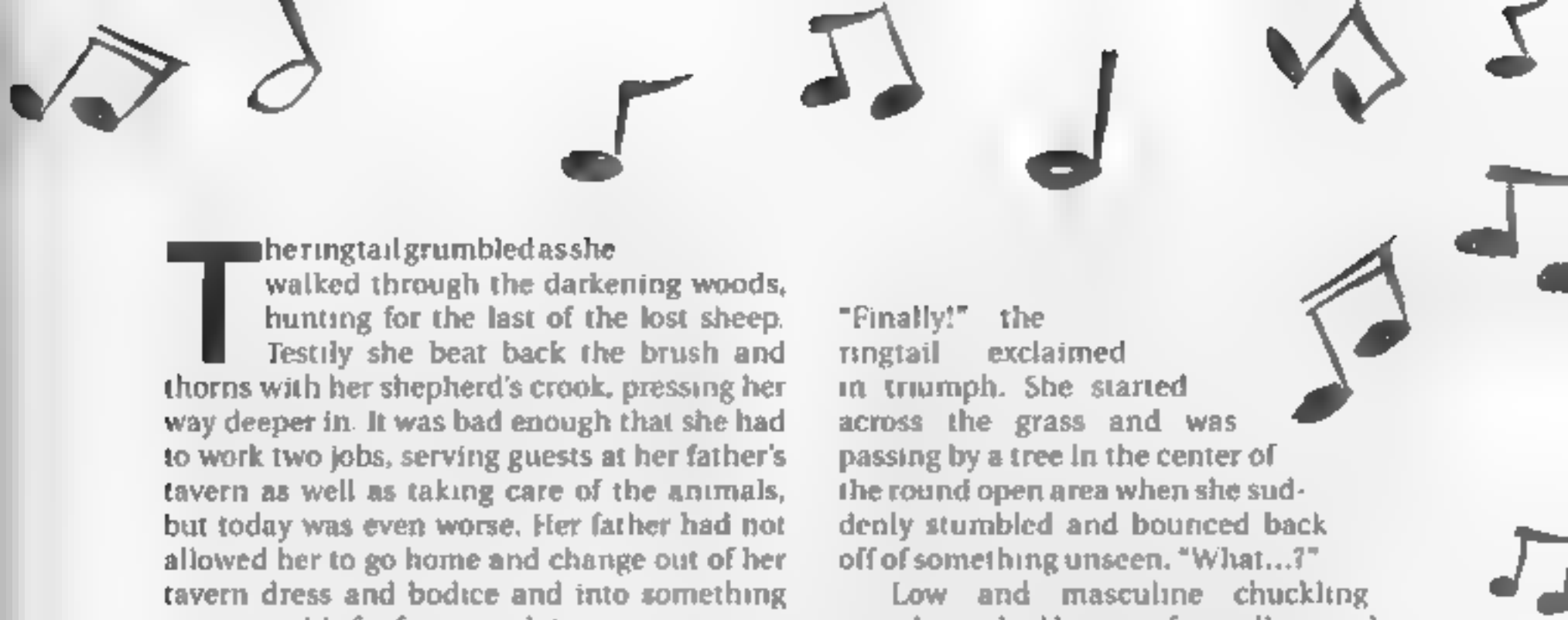
The Fairy Ring

by Kim Liu



illustrated by Megan Giles

m.g.



Theringtail grumbled as she walked through the darkening woods, hunting for the last of the lost sheep. Testily she beat back the brush and thorns with her shepherd's crook, pressing her way deeper in. It was bad enough that she had to work two jobs, serving guests at her father's tavern as well as taking care of the animals, but today was even worse. Her father had not allowed her to go home and change out of her tavern dress and bodice and into something more suitable for forest trudging.

"I'll be mending the tears on this dress for hours," she sighed, peering around and through the trees for any sign of the last lost ewe. The latest group of armored louts to ride up to the tavern/inn had uncaringly left the yard gate open after themselves, allowing the sheep to escape. Looking up at the setting sun, the ringtail sighed again, trying to find the bright side—at least she wasn't stuck in the tavern serving the soon-to-be-drunken louts and having to deal with them.

A flash of white ducked behind some bushes in the distance. "There you are!" she cried. Hiking up her skirts as best she could with one hand, she hurried towards the glimpse of white, her ringed tail following and curving in the air behind her with her stride. Her green eyes glanced up at the darkening skies, and a frown appeared under the bundle of her raven hair.

Her ears flicked, trying to catch any sound of the last lamb. "Aethria, don't be late!" she muttered, mocking her father's nasal and whining voice. Then, shoulders slumped and tail dropping limply to the ground, she replied in her own tired voice, "You're just worried you'll have no one to clean the floors." She swallowed a few curses she had picked up from the patrons as she tried to squeeze in between some brushes, raising her tail as high as possible from all the burrs and thistles.

With a final tug at the branches that were trying to prevent her from passing through, Aethria pulled herself into a clearing in the woods. The sound of more stitches popping in her dress only made her sigh louder. Leaning against a large rock, she wheezed and seriously considered loosing her bodice. In the fading light, she spied the white ewe standing placidly on the far side of the clearing next to another rock.

"Finally!" the ringtail exclaimed in triumph. She started across the grass and was passing by a tree in the center of the round open area when she suddenly stumbled and bounced back off of something unseen. "What...?"

Low and masculine chuckling sounds reached her ears from all around. "Who's there?" she asked warily while pulling herself up against the tree. Looking around, she realized the tree was surrounded by a small ring of mushrooms—that the entire clearing was too round and had a circle of half-buried stones sunk into the ground. "No..." Leaving her shepherd's crook leaning against the tree, she walked forward with both hands outstretched, but stopped abruptly as she ran into something that kept her from leaving the ring.

"Oh yes, pretty one."

Aethria spun around at the sound of the male voice, but only saw the sheep. "Who's there?" she asked the voice.

The sheep flickered and disappeared, replaced by a short and colorfully dressed humanoid with a craggy, furless face and pointed ears. It was a fairy, and it grinned mischievously. "Just me," he answered, holding his harp in one hand and tipping his hat with the other.

"And me," said another voice from behind her. She spun around and saw a second fairy carrying a silver flute. He was taller and thinner than she was, and he grinned down at her as he walked up to the edge of the ring. The white of his clothing and cap shimmered in the darkening shadows.

"Me too!" a third fairy chimed in from one side. This one was about her size, dressed in traveler's leathers and hat and carrying a lute.

"Don't forget me," came from the fourth quarter of the ring from a drably dressed and squat fairy carrying a small drum. "Oooh, a pretty one indeed!" he leered as the four surrounded her near the edges of the ring. No more voices were forthcoming as the ringtail backed up against the tree in the center.

Aethria's tail curled tight around the tree behind her in a reflexive response to steady herself. After being reassured by the presence of the solid wood at her back, her tail slowly relaxed. "Let me go," she demanded, swallowing nervously. She tried to watch all four directions at once and failed.

A chorus of chuckles answered her.

"So soon? Nay," said the one with the silver flute.

The ringtail's jaw clenched and her ears went back. Fairy or not, they acted just like the normal oafs who came to the tavern. Fear warred with annoyance inside her head—they undoubtedly wanted to play their little games with her, though with these creatures, the games might be more dangerous. She steadied the shepherd's crook against the small tree and folded her arms, waiting for the next bit. It was always a little game, a wager, be it her family or the customers, setting up little rules for her to follow for their amusement—a pretend veneer of fairness over their abuse.

"Perhaps a little contest?" the lute carrier mused, grinning.

Aethria closed her eyes. "Of course. Wouldn't be any fun otherwise, would it?" she snapped, then lifted her lids to glare at the four. "A contest that I can't win? Please, say on, kind sirs."

The four seemed taken aback by her venom and the drummer's face darkened in anger, but the flute player raised a hand to still the other three. "Perhaps we erred in our judgment—if you wish, you can go straight to serving us in our demesne for seven years as a scullery maid," he said softly, running a finger along the flute. "But that would be so dull."

Aethria swallowed hard, almost regretting the outburst. "What other road is left me? Seven years for yourselves, or seven for my family—what difference would it be?" she asked wearily, then shrugged. "Why should I play your game?"

"For fun?" the lute player suggested.

"For our fun," the drummer corrected.

"Why not?" the harpist asked.

"Because you might win?" the flute holder suggested, eyes narrowed. He tilted his head, amused yet briefly respecting. "Unlikely for a wench like yourself, but if that's what all you wish to be..."

The ringtail straightened and met the flute player's gaze. "And what might I win, Sir Fairy?" she asked, stung by the comment.

The strange, fey eyes looked more amused. "For each of us you defeat, a service," he replied. The other three looked briefly uncomfortable.

"Four against one? I see. How sporting."

"No one said it would be easy." He grinned at her in the way amused predators do. "And your choice is?"

"What is your game, Sir Fairy?" Aethria asked warily.

"If you manage to steal a fairy hat, you've won a service—and you must take one before dawn to go free." A faint chorus of chuckles came from the other three as he continued. "If you lose, of course, then it is seven years service. As Prince of the Fairies, I do declare this challenge. Do you accept?"

"Taking hats?" Aethria looked at the four of them and flicked her ears and tail uncertainly. There had to be some catch to this. "How can I give chase when trapped?"

"The clearing will be the arena, with the first to leave before dawn the loser."

The ringtail knew there still had to be some trick, but she could not see it. However, seeing no alternative, she declared, "I accept, Prince."

"Let the contest begin, then." The prince grinned and raised the flute to his lips.

Aethria cocked her ears, noticing the other three readying to play as well. She could sense the catch in the contest coming, even as she lunged forward to try to grab the hat from the prince.

The drummer smacked his drum and Aethria found her feet stumbling to a halt. The harpist strummed a few notes and she found her arms swaying to the music, still short of reaching the fairy prince. "What?" she gasped as she stumbled back towards the tree.

"No, sirs, I'm not,"

*she said,
taking a deep
breath before
reaching up to
unlace her
bodice.*

The lute player grinned and took off his hat and waved it at her. When she tried to grab it, flute music reached out and turned the snap of her arms into a graceful near curtsy. For the next hour it went, with the ringtail becoming more ensnared in the music as surely as if she were chained, each sound and beat holding or guiding her limbs against her wishes.

"Still feeling so impertinent?" the drummer leered as she sagged against the tree, panting "Giving up?"

She glared daggers at him, which only elicited laughter. The strum of the lute danced down her spine and curled her tail around to tickle her own face. Aethria felt ready to burst into tears. She had never thought she could feel as humiliated as she felt now. Making a fist, she slammed into the tree in frustration and heard the beat of the drum echo her action. She pulled herself up to the trill of the flute and lunged herself back into the contest.

The second hour was a repeat of the first, with the music becoming even tighter around her. The laughter of the drummer mixed with the sound of the lute as it made her pose for him just out of reach, or the chuckling of the harpist as the flute made her swoon and spin in front of him. Each note was like the pull of a string, with her as their puppet, made to dance to their whims. By the end she was left on the ground, tripped up by her own skirts.

"Ooh, clumsy, clumsy," the harpist chided. She looked up and saw him rubbing his fingers together.

"Not doing too well, are you?" the drummer smirked.

The lute player stretched his hands as well as he asked, "Ready to give up?"

Aethria clenched her hands again, sprawled out on the ground, and tried to catch her breath. Tears threatened to flow as she squeezed her eyes shut, but she fought to hold them back. The fairy magic seemed to have grown even more entwined about her body the more she fought the compulsion of the music. Every breath of sound sent quivers down her body

now and tugged at her limbs like strings pulling in every direction. The spell was so strong she could almost feel the knots of it when she pushed herself up off the ground.

A memory slipped into her head of one of her grandmother's favorite phrases: "You can't push on a rope, silly." The ringtail shook her head at the sudden memory, trying to figure out a way to escape. One ear flicked around automatically as she heard a light trickle of notes from the lute.

The music made the ringtail pause, panting as she looked down at the ground, still half sprawled among the tangle of her skirts. The long black and white ringed tail lashed once as she tried to pull at the enchantment around her, not trying to flee so much as—a faint trill of harp notes reached her ears. Her green eyes widened and then narrowed as she sat up fully and glared at her captors. "No, sirs, I'm not," she said, taking a deep breath before reaching up to unlace her bodice.

"What's this?" the drummer asked, leaning closer and leering as her clothes slid down her body. "Trying to distract us, dearie?"

"Such beauty will be nice to have serve around the castle," the prince murmured, watching her slim but attractive bust come into view.

Aethria's ears flushed and flattened, but she raised her muzzle defiantly and stood up, leaning on the small tree for support. Her hands unfastened the final laces of her clothing before letting her skirts and bodice fall down to her feet in a heap, which she kicked to one side. Her furred body

was slender and her limbs well toned from hard work. The gray furred legs slid slightly apart, looking silver in the moonlight. She set herself, and the rise and fall of the white furred breasts stilled, her large eyes closing.

"Oh, now this should be an interesting dance!" the lutist snickered, resting his hands on the strings of his instrument and getting ready to play again.

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as her clothes slid
down her body.
"Trying to
distract us,
dearie?"*

The ringtail's eyes opened, glittering silver-green. "Indeed, sirs," she murmured, trying to stretch out and feel the magic around her in the moonbeams, trying to wrap it around her body even tighter. She swung her right leg up swiftly, bending at the knee before slamming it down into the ground with a stomp even as she leaped up into the air with her other spinning around with her tail swirling behind her

The drummer made a startled grunt as his hands slammed into the drum with her first stomp, quickly followed by two more fast, hard beats on his instrument as the ringtail landed, one foot at a time in quick succession. "What the ?" he cried. The other three players were likewise startled, and also found themselves echoing her motions in sound

Aethria grinned, teeth bared in anticipation, but that look faded into concentration as she started to dance, driving the music, not giving the music a chance to drive her. The cool evening air ran through her fur as she stomp-leaped again, whipping around to face the drummer. Feet slammed into the ground in quick succession again, followed almost immediately by hands slapping against legs, also in quick succession, as Aethria landed into a crouch in front of the fairy drummer, breasts quivering from her actions. The drum sounded out four heavy beats, the drummer's arms a blur as he strained to keep up.

Without pause the ringtail straightened with a snap of her body and her tail. One arm, then the other unfolded from her body in quick, sharp motions, shoulder and elbow each snapping out in turn, each echoed by the music. As she swung her hips sharply to one side, then the other, she watched the drummer's hands beat furiously. Behind her she could hear the

other three struggling to follow the counterpoint motions of her tail

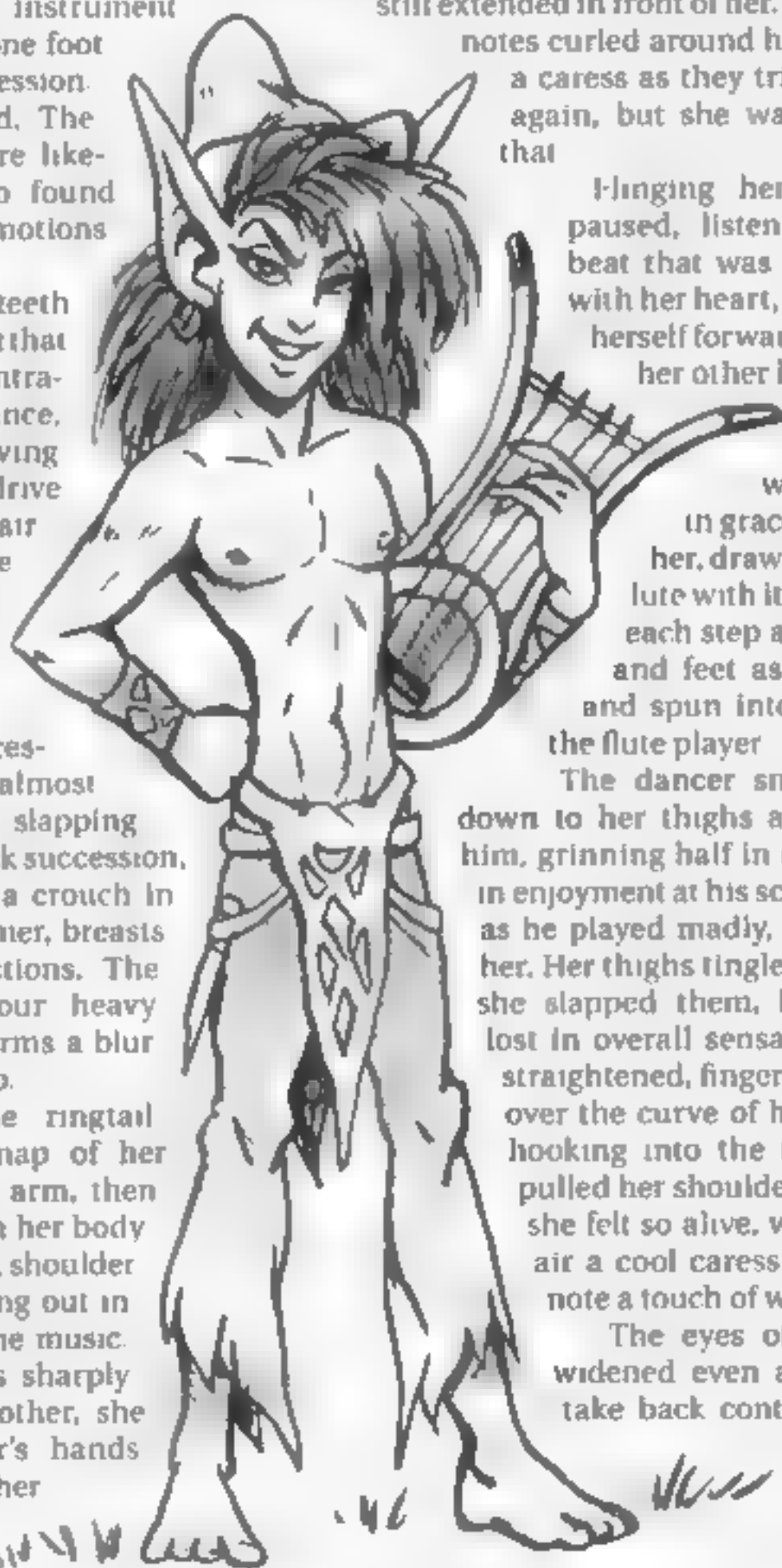
The gray-furred fingers spread and stretched out before clenching like talons at the weave of magic around her. With another twist she leaped to the side, kicking out one leg high and around, briefly embarrassed by the view of her naked body that the motion gave the harpist, but the concern faded as she concentrated on the dance and the music. The blood thrummed through her body as she arched her back, chin down, standing on one foot with the other leg still extended in front of her. The harp and flute

notes curled around her in something of a caress as they tried to take control again, but she was having none of that

Flinging her head back she paused, listening to the drum beat that was trying to keep up with her heart, and then she flung herself forward, kicking out with her other leg as she switched feet. She spun around the tree with her tail flowing in graceful curves behind her, drawing the notes of the lute with it. The drum echoed each step and flick of her legs and feet as she leaped again and spun into place in front of the flute player

The dancer snapped her hands down to her thighs again as she faced him, grinning half in challenge and half in enjoyment at his scowl above the flute as he played madly, trying to overtake her. Her thighs tingled and stung where she slapped them, but the pain was lost in overall sensation as she slowly straightened, fingers trailing up slowly over the curve of her hips, her waist, hooking into the flute notes as she pulled her shoulders back. Never had she felt so alive, with each breath of air a cool caress on her skin, each note a touch of warmth.

The eyes of the fairy prince widened even as he struggled to take back control of his playing, his gaze drawn to the creature in front of him



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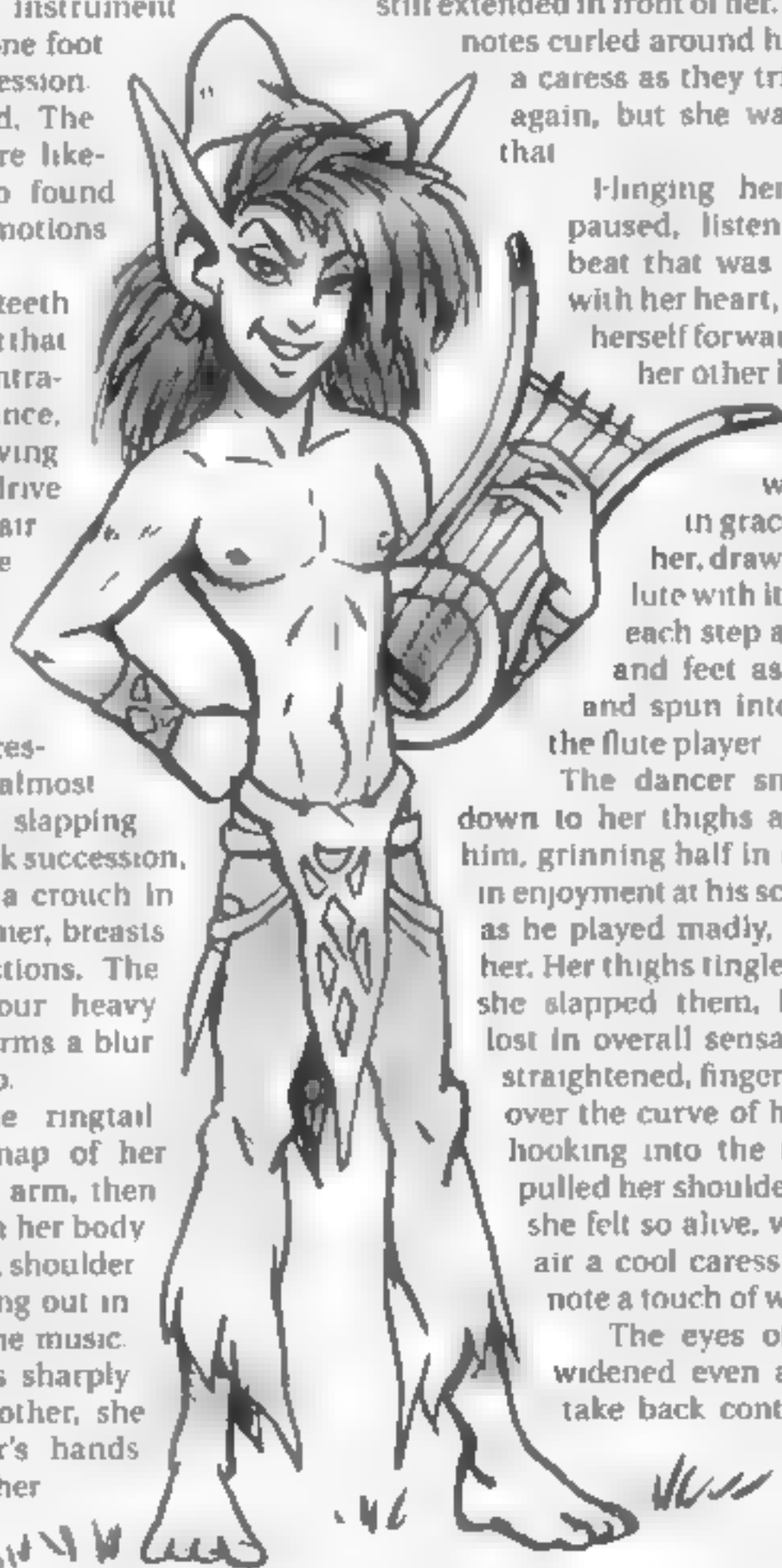
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as her eyes closed in slow pleasure, head and shoulders rolling back as fingers trailed up in sensual slowness along the ringtail's sides before reaching the sides of her breasts. His fingers struggled to find new notes even as hers traced slow, languid circles around her curves, spiraling slowly through white fur towards flushed nipples.

A faint sigh escaped from Aethria's mouth, her back arching more as she lifted up onto her toes, hips and front out towards the flute player as she slowly brought her fingers together over her heart, pulling the flute into one note. Even though her tail quivered behind her madly, sending violent echoes of harp and lute through the night, her body stood in rock steady tension, her fingers drifting slowly, slowly down the front of her body, drawing out that one magical note. Her body burned even higher now and all sensations were fire—the feel of her breasts, between her legs. A faint gasp slipped from her as her fingers passed through the soft white fur of her flat belly and she forced herself to move them even slower in their journey.

The drum beat fiercely in time to her heart, and the eyes of the prince were starting to widen even farther as her fingers crept slowly down in front of him towards her lower belly. The sustained note of the flute started to become shrill as he found himself trapped, unable to stop playing, unable to breathe and unable to drag his eyes away as she slid her fingers down closer and closer but slower and slower.

Muzzle parted ever so slightly, head and shoulders arched back far enough that had she opened her eyes she could have stared up at the moon above. Aethria forced herself to stop just before her fingers reached the bud of her sex, though her body begged for release, it was just another delicious burning in her blood. She lifted her head slowly, eyes open to stare at the prince even as the flute note weakened. His eyes were filled with a mix of desire, desperation, and even a touch of awe as they stared at her, only pride keeping them from begging for the release she denied both him and herself.

A slow smile spread across her face as the ringtail tasted this power she had over him, mingling it with all the other sensations she was feeling. With a teasing, soft laugh, she slowly pulled her fingers apart, causing flushed red flesh of deeper nature to be briefly exposed, sliding them towards her hips with her fingers spreading over fur before flicking them away

from her body. The flute faded abruptly as the fairy sagged gasping and fighting for his own breath as the ringtail spun away on light, prancing feet around the tree to the lute and harp players.

The two musicians were both flushed and breathing hard as their fingers flicked over the strings of their instruments. As Aethria danced closer, they both focused their efforts again, trying to seize her in their web of notes. Giving another soft laugh she spiraled into their notes with her dance, pulling them along with her. She pushed her arms out from her sides and faced one palm towards each of the two players, her fingers mimicking their playing as she swayed slowly from side to side, first on one foot, then the other, drawing the drum into time with them.

The swaying motion slid up to move her entire body as she slowly brought her hands to her breasts, cupping without touching even as her fingers rippled and flicked as if playing or stroking. Her hands moved up towards her shoulders, just brushing her fur enough to reveal how hard and red her nipples quivered on her chest, before her hands drifted back downwards, brushing the fur back with dancing fingers and drawing a cascade of notes from lute and harp. With a half turn away, the dancer stretched her hands out in front of her, fingers still stroking the air, and started to caress some invisible shape in the moonlight.

The lute chords slid out into the night as her fingers drifted across immaterial shoulders, describing their width and strength as she slid around and against and then behind her imaginary partner. Harp notes spilled out as she curled her arms in front of her as if caressing the hard chest and stomach of a lover, her arms moving up and down gracefully in counterpoint to each other, tangling and drawing the harp with them. The lute came to the fore again as she slid around to the front of her ghostly lover, turning her back towards the two players as she embraced the air, bending her head up as if to receive a kiss.

Weak but game flute notes echoed around the tree as the fairy prince tried to step back in, but Aethria rocked her hips slowly against the night, arms clenched as if pulling her lover nearer, then rocking forward again, pulling herself up onto the balls of her feet. The flute faltered, and was trapped again as her hands clawed at the air, as if trying to grasp someone's

back, her hips and body rocking faster and harder. The drum beat picked up and was woven into the sound of the flute, harp, and lute, bound into the rolling of her shoulders, the sway and curl of her tail, and the thrust and clutching of her body. The notes flew out faster and faster with the dancer until with a cry of triumph and pleasure she flung her arms wide, smashing the notes together in one final climax and leaving a stunned silence among the four fairies.

Aethria remained standing on her toes, back arched, arms spread, ecstasy on her face for a moment. One ear flicked, and a sly grin expressed itself as she gracefully leaped towards the small tree in the center of the fairy ring. Her shepherd's crook fairly flew into her right hand as her left grasped the tree trunk. Her ringed tail trailed behind her as she spun around the tree, her left hand holding on while she stretched her body and right arm out wide with the crook extended.

Four soft puffs of sound met her ears. Four cries of dismay soon followed as she lifted the crook up, bringing her left hand up by her right. Four hats fell into her left hand. "Four services, my lord fairies!" she cried out, clutching her trophies. And then she sagged back against the tree as her legs gave out.

"The wench cheated!" the drummer spat, hands resting limply in his lap. "She took us by crook!"

The fairy prince gasped out a reply, but had to wait for a second, deeper breath before making it understandable. "The challenge has been won," he wheezed, looking at the equally exhausted ringtail slumped against the tree. "Fairly or not, she's free to go." He tried to put faint emphasis on the last word, glancing at his fellows.

The harpist clutched his bleeding finger tips under his arms and groaned. "Whose bright idea was this?" he complained.

Aethria opened her eyes and looked at him. "Not mine, I think," she panted, failing to get to her feet. "You're the one who pretended to be my sheep."

"Oh hush, you," the harpist grumped.

"Stop your whining," the lute-playing fairy said, looking at his own abused and bleeding fingers, then grinning at the dancer. "The view was worth it. Better than any I've seen, even in the vice pits of Riverhold."

Aethria's ears burned faintly as she realized she was still naked, but she was too exhausted to really care. Her whole body still tingled and quivered with sensations she was too tired to deal with. "I think there was a matter of some services good fairies," she reminded them and tried to stand again, this time using her crook as a staff. The four hats were still clutched in her left hand.

The drum player huffed and folded his arms. "Don't be silly, you piece of fluff," he sneered, but looked a little uneasy. "You can't be serious. What makes you think we have to do anything for you?"

"Because I won," she answered, standing straight despite the cramping in her legs. "I met your challenge and won."

"Yes, yes you did," the voice of the prince came from behind her, and close. She jumped, startled, even as firm, warm hands rested on her shoulders and started rubbing them. "And the view was worth the price," he murmured into her ear, then kissed her cheek from behind. "You have a fire in you that still burns." Another kiss followed the first as he pulled her closer against his strong body, his hands stroking her upper arms. "Let me help you with that."

"My...my Prince..." Aethria shivered, feeling the desires low in her belly start to grow again. Her ears flushed and her heart skipped a beat as his right hand reached around to curl around one breast, stroking through her fur.

"Come, turn, beauty, and wrap your arms and legs around me," he whispered in soft, dusky tones, marred by a faint hoarseness. "Let me take you—ooof!" The fairy prince staggered back as she slammed her right elbow into him, then thrust away his left hand from where it had been creeping down towards the four hats still carried in her left.

Aethria rolled her eyes disgustedly as he tripped over a tree root and sat down hard. "You bunch are just the same as any group of louts that doesn't want to pay their bills," she complained, glaring at them. "Well, that isn't going to work." Her eyes fell back on the prince as he pulled himself back up and tried to regain some semblance of dignity. "Though, you know, I think I like your suggestion as a service," the ringtail added slowly, tilting her head to one side and studying the handsome prince.

The fairy blinked, then smiled slowly. "Indeed, oh fair one?"

The morning sun was just creeping over the forest as a rather bedraggled and miserable looking ringtail stumbled out of the underbrush onto the forest road, carrying a shepherd's crook in one hand and followed by a sheep. After tripping over her skirts again, she turned and made a fist, shaking it at the forest behind her and cursing.

"Now now, that's no way for a serving wench to speak," Aethria said as she emerged from the woods as well, leading a white horse. The packs on the horse carried the drums, the flute, the harp, and the lute, as well as traveling supplies. Though tired, she looked pleased enough, dressed in the leather traveling clothes the lute player had worn, now modified to fit her a bit better. She settled his hat on her head as she looked at the twin ringtail, who had formerly been the drummer. "Remember, you have to

be me for a year—whatever you do to people there at the inn afterwards is up to you."

"I understand," the other ringtail answered sourly, then started stomping down the road towards the inn with the sheep following.

Aethria grinned and swished her tail slowly as she looked up and spotted two disgruntled looking white songbirds in the trees nearby. "After we make camp tonight, I expect my first harp lessons," she told them. "The other one can cook tonight." One sullen and one morose chirp answered her.

Straining her sore legs, Aethria half-leapt, half-pulled herself up onto the saddle, wrapping her arms and legs around the horse briefly as she gathered herself, then sat up and took the reins. "Okay, Prince, you can take me away—take me to Riverhold. I want to know more about music and dancing."

The fairy stallion rolled his eyes at the ringtail and stomped one hoof in grudging respect, with perhaps a glint of bemusement in his eyes, before starting down the road into the new day.



Stolen Moment

by Black Teagan



Tobias

Yes, Love

It's just

I'm frightened
for you, Tob

They could come
at any moment for
you

Hush love
It's a million miles
away from us tonight









I love you, too

I love you, too

TOBIAS FINN!

knock

Open up! We know you're in there, Tobias!
You're under arrest!

Tobias!

Don't worry

They'll never really catch Tobias Finn

To be continued?

THE PRISONER'S RELEASE

-PART TWO



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stomach grew more and more acute, faded away and returned with a vengeance. His sleep grew more restless, spotted with uneasy dreams.

They were weakening him, he realized, starving him to batter down his resistance. They'd done it before. So this would be the end. He would not see Streak again, and maybe they would weaken him so much that he would give away his secrets.

He sat up, pulled one paw below his neck, and rested his head on the chain. With some difficulty, he lifted his paw around the other side of his head and then down, so the chain made a loop around his neck. The clinking of the links echoed around the cell. He lowered his body and felt the tension increase in the chain.

Could he do this? He lay down further and heard his breath start to wheeze as the chain tightened. The urge to sit up flooded through him, but his body was weak enough that he could fight it. He panicked as his breathing became more labored, and scrabbled briefly at the chain before pulling his paw away again. Spots appeared in front of his eyes and his body thrashed around, finally jerking forward.

The chain loosened, and he gulped down deep lungfuls of air, half sobbing as he did so. He felt dizzy, and was still seeing spots. Frantically, he tried to lift his arm over his head again as he felt consciousness slipping from him, but the

He put a paw to his throat. "I...think so." Something was different. He held up his paw and looked at it. The shackles were gone. "What

Streak was unlocking the shackles on his legs. "I've got to get you out of here."

Volle paused to digest that. He moved his arms around experimentally. They felt oddly detached. "Why?"

"They're going to kill you. Starve you to death. How long has it been since they brought food? Three days? Four? Five?"

"Don't know. Since you came." Volle's head was clearing, slowly, but now he was becoming aware of the gnawing emptiness in his stomach and the weakness in his limbs. "How did...?"

"I stole the key." Streak picked up something from the floor and shook it out. "Here, put these on." Volle stared at the pants, and Streak sighed. "You poor, okay, here." He slid them over Volle's feet.

"Okay, okay." The fabric rubbed his fur the wrong way, and the sensation pulled him at least partly into awareness. Volle pulled them up and fastened them. They were extremely loose on him, and felt odd after so long without clothes. "Where did you get all this?"

"This is my spare uniform. It'll be loose but it'll fit. I can't carry you naked through the prison." He handed Volle the shirt.

With some difficulty, Volle slid it on. His fingers fumbled as he fastened it around the front, and at the lowest button his muscles protested. He hadn't stretched his arms that far in months.

"All set?" Streak's ears were back and he looked grim. He set his arms beneath Volle and lifted. Volle felt the muscles in his arms tighten. "You're so light."

Volle put a paw on the wolf's chest. "I think I can walk."

"Later." Streak smiled, a tight nervous smile, and kissed his nose quickly. "When we get to the top."

He pulled the fox to his chest and stood up. Volle tried putting his arms around Streak's neck, but the tension was too uncomfortable and he dropped them to his own chest. The wolf turned and walked toward the open door and the light beyond, and as he turned Volle to walk through it the fox caught a glimpse of his empty shackles lying beside the gutter in the floor, water glistening on the wall beyond. Then they were through the door, and out.

He remembered the hallways, dead grey stone with torch sconces placed regularly. Compared to the blackness he'd lived in for the past few days, the light was almost blinding. Volle squinted as Streak hurried through the corridors.

"Do you know anyone in the palace who can hide you? I don't know anyone in the city and you're not strong enough to get out yet."

The name he'd made himself forget floated tantalizingly out of reach. He knew he couldn't go there anyway, though. But Helfer would be okay. Helfer would help him. "Yes. West wing, second floor."

"I can get you there."

They hadn't met any other guards, and Volle thought this was strange, but perhaps he was

the only prisoner down here. "Where are the other guards?"

"Other wings. You were pretty isolated. There's a back stair we can use. Then you'll have to walk to the palace from there. It's the middle of the night, though. We should be okay."

Volle nodded. Streak was walking quickly but not running, and the motion was pleasant, almost lulling the fox back to sleep. He forced himself to stay awake as they passed scores of open cells, walked up a dimly lit staircase, and passed slowly through a more open series of cells with windows in the doors.

"Oops," Streak muttered under his breath as he stopped and turned quickly, and Volle caught a whiff of rat scent. Then it was gone. The wolf marched down another hallway and to a staircase. At the top, behind a closed door, he set Volle down gently.

"We have to walk from here. I'll support you. If anyone stops us, you're my drunk friend, I'm walking you back to the barracks."

"They're not in this direction." He was surprised that the map of the city remained so strong in his head.

"It's the best I could come up with. It'll explain away part of the smell, too."

Volle nodded. "Okay." He stood gingerly, and his knees buckled almost immediately. He grabbed at Streak for support. The wolf had his arms around him in an instant, holding him upright. Volle looked into the warm blue eyes.

"Thank you," he said softly. He nuzzled Streak and braced himself on the wolf's powerful frame.

Streak looked embarrassed. His ears flicked and he nuzzled only briefly before looking away. "Let's get going before it gets light."

He pushed the door open, and Volle staggered at the cold, fresh air. The scents were clear and sharp, the air not musty with memories and pain. As he stepped out, he glanced up and stopped dead, transfixed by the glittering pat-

terns of stars in the sky. The cold air seared his lungs, but he drank it in gratefully

"Come on," Streak started to say, but trailed off when he saw the glistening in Volle's eyes. "Hey .it's okay..."

Volle swallowed "I really forgot how beautiful they are " He lowered his gaze to Streak's white muzzle looking at the blue eyes shining in the starlight Slowly he lifted his muzzle and the wolf hesitated, then met it, tightening his hold around Volle

Volle closed his eyes and let himself be washed away on the sensations the cold air ruffling his fur, the tight press of Streak's muscles against him, and the warm lupine muzzle locked with his. Their tongues caressed, and then separated

"We should go " Streak said again, but Volle just looked at him with a slight smile. "What?"

"I never knew...how beautiful you are."

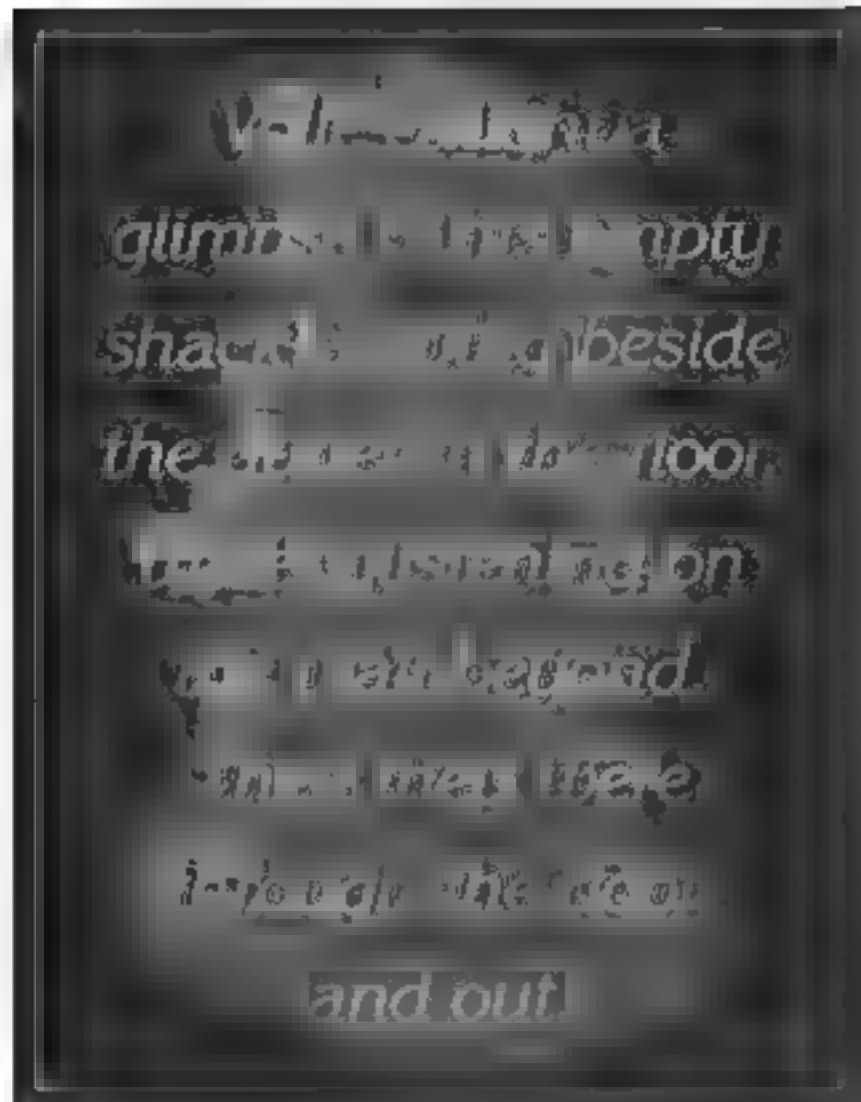
Streak swallowed, and Volle saw him fight back tears of his own. "Fox..."

"I know, I know. Let's go." Volle turned, reluctantly, and stepped forward onto the road His legs were still unsteady and he needed every ounce of the wolf's support

The palace's turrets rose about half a mile away, dull grey stone that reflected only a little of the starlight Only the very tops, gold-leafed, shone at all. The road leading there from the prison was narrow and winding, and Volle kept looking back and forth at the dark houses and shops on either side

"Keep your head down," Streak hissed nervously, and Volle tried to act drunk

It took them forever to make it the half-mile Volle had to stop and rest at one point, so he sat on a house's front stoop while Streak paced nervously Twice they heard someone coming and tensed, but the passerby gave them barely a second glance Finally, they came to a stop at a metal gate.



"You gonna be okay?" Streak braced Volle against the wall and Volle nodded He flexed his legs gingerly They were sore and still unsteady, but he thought he could go a little further

"What did you steal all the keys?" he asked as the wolf fitted a key to the keyhole in the gate.

Streak didn't answer immediately, as he pushed the gate open He put his arm around Volle and guided him in "The guards have a master set," he said closing the gate behind them, "I just picked the ones I thought would be useful " He jingled his pocket and flashed a brief grin, but he didn't seem to be any less nervous now that they were in the palace.

They had walked into one of the gardens, but Volle had to spot the elaborate flowery design before he knew which one it was. The garden seemed eerie in the starlight, deserted except for the two of them, the flowers' colors all muted and their scents faded for the night It should be romantic, Volle thought a nighttime garden but the silence and the chill disturbed him

"It's this way, I think," Streak said, guiding him down one path.

"Yeah. Down here and around that corner there's a door that usually isn't locked." The shortcuts were coming back to him, weak as he was. "Then there's a stair to the right. We can cut through the servants' quarters to the west wing."

"Okay."

They walked quickly down the path. Volle felt the crunch of the gravel under his paws, and it brought back other memories...he pushed them aside and concentrated on taking steps.

The door was just as he'd remembered it, decorated with the king's crest in carved wood, not painted like the fancier doors in the main garden and out front. They pulled it open and stepped into the palace.

Volle had barely had time to see the staircase when he heard footsteps coming down it. His eyes met Streak's, and then the wolf pushed the door open, looking panicked.

Volle shook his head quickly, then collapsed to his knees with his head out the door. He made retching noises, and tried to shake appropriately.

"Bad night?" he heard behind him.

"A bit too much," Streak said. Volle hoped the other didn't hear the waver in his voice. "Just letting him get it out of his system."

"Okay. Try to keep it down. And clean it up when you're done." The footsteps receded.

Volle braced himself against the door and levered himself upwards. Streak was at his side immediately, helping pull him to his feet. "You think fast."

"Have to." He gave the wolf a small grin. "Let's go."

They made it up the stairs and through the servants' quarters without incident. On the other side, Volle looked up and down the opulent corridor and headed immediately to the right. He found an ornate door and nodded to Streak, who pushed it open gently. It opened onto a small foyer, with a padded bench and a

small side door that Volle knew led to the valet's room. He guided Streak past it and to the larger door on the other side of the foyer, which was made of some fancy wood, carved with Helfer's family crest and brushed with gold leaf.

Streak moved to open the door, but Volle stopped him. He raised a paw and knocked. After a few seconds, Streak knocked louder. They waited, and after a short time they heard sniffling footsteps inside. The door cracked open.

"Do you know what time it is? What is it?" Volle recognized the weasel's voice, which lost some of its sharp irritation when he spotted the guard's uniform. He hadn't seen Volle yet.

"Hi, Hef," Volle said.

The door opened slightly wider, and Volle saw the ruddy fur of his friend's muzzle. His black eyes widened.

"What the—Volle? What are you doing here?"

"Need to stay here for a bit."

"By the gods, you look awful. And smell worse." The weasel hesitated. "I've been hearing things..."

Volle managed a weak smile. "What are they saying about me?"

"That you're a spy, and a traitor. That you ran back to Ferrenis."

"Oh, that."

"Oh, that? Volle, if that's true..."

"I haven't been to Ferrenis. I've been in prison." At that, the weasel's ears shot up. "Relax, Hef. You're in no danger."

"I am now! Prison? You've been in prison? You've escaped, haven't you? What if someone finds you here?"

"That seems a lot more likely the longer we stand out here in your foyer."

The weasel didn't move. Finally, he said, "Oh, all right. Come on in."

Streak helped Volle into the rooms, and Helfer shut the door quickly behind them.

Helfer's parlor, elaborately decorated with yellow velvet curtains and small tapestries lining the walls, showed signs of what the weasel had been up to the previous night. The curtains were closed over the elaborate double window, the door to the large wine cabinet hung partly open, and the loveseat had been moved to sit in front of the now-cold fireplace. On the floor to one side, a half-empty bottle of wine and two empty glasses stood forgotten, and Volle saw more than one article of clothing nearby them, almost forming a trail to the curtained doorway that led further into the apartment.

He often wondered why Helfer bothered to keep a desk in this room at all. Alone of all the furnishings, the desk showed no signs of recent use, and its simple wooden style didn't seem to fit in with the reddish-orange patterned loveseat or the matching chairs and various small rugs that lay scattered over the floor.

Helfer looked Volle up and down as they stepped in, and now there was concern in his eyes. "You really do look awful. What in the name of Weasel happened to you?"

"He needs food," Streak said. "They starved him for the last three days."

"Mm." Helfer turned to Streak and gave him an appraising look. "At least your tastes haven't changed much. He looks as good as you look terrible."

Streak's ears flicked back. He started to say something, and Helfer raised a small paw. "I know. I'll get food sent up right away. And please, Volle, put something on besides that horrid uniform. It really doesn't suit you."

"Later," the fox coughed. "I was hoping to use your private bath."

"Yes, yes, of course. Phew." The weasel waved a paw in front of his nose. "Worse than the time you drank too much ale and fell into the gutter."

"Which time?" Volle cracked a small grin.

Helfer flashed a quick grin back, then bit his lip worriedly. "Stay here. Sit down, for Weasel's sake." He gestured towards a richly upholstered chair, and then slipped out the front door.

Streak helped Volle over to the chair, and the fox collapsed into it. "You feeling okay?" Streak asked, bending over him.

"Apart from the hole in my stomach, the dizziness, and the feeling that I couldn't walk another step, I feel great." Volle looked up. "I owe you a lot."

The wolf nuzzled him, and looked away bashfully. "Not so much. I mean, I only did what I had to."

Helfer slipped back in. "He's going to get some food from the kitchens."

"Caresh?"

"Yes. Excellent valet. Never asks questions. Volle, what is going on?"

"Excuse me," Streak said. "I need to get back and put these keys back before Gerrold comes on duty."

Volle lifted a paw and Streak took it, holding it tightly. "Thank you again," the fox said, and lifted his muzzle.

Streak met it in a soft, quick kiss. "Bye, fox—Volle. I'll be back when I get off duty today. Be careful when you eat. Remember what happened last time."

Volle smiled at the use of his name, and at the wolf's concern. "I will. Be careful."

Streak let his paw go slowly, and walked to the door. Helfer was still standing there, watching them. As Streak approached, he opened the door a crack.

Streak extended a paw. "Pleasure to meet you, sir."

"Far as I'm concerned, you were never here." Helfer shook his paw with a smile, and shut the door behind him after he slipped out. He

turned, looked at Volle, then padded over to the chair opposite him and sat down. "Volle?"

Volle gave him a measured look. "Thank you for all your help, Helfer. This would be a very nice time of year to visit your Vellenland estate, wouldn't it?"

"Is it that bad?"

"It could be. I don't know yet, but it might. I'll probably be okay. But it would certainly be safer for you not to be here."

The weasel tapped his paw against the floor. "If you say so, I'm not inclined to argue. But Volle, are you really?" He stopped, tilted his muzzle and smiled. "No, don't bother answering. You know I never like to get mixed up in anything serious at the palace."

"I know," Volle smiled, and couldn't keep his eyes from drifting shut. He hadn't had time to make up a plausible explanation for why he'd been arrested, but he trusted himself to be able to later. "It's not true, Hef. Dereath caught me in what he thought was a compromising position. They've been interrogating me—some plans disappeared."

"Compromising position, eh? Probably not the kind I'm thinking of. No, no—I told you not to bother. So who's the wolf? He seems quite devoted."

"He saved my life." Volle opened his eyes again. "We were set up to fall in love, though."

"Why should that make a difference?" Helfer grinned at him. "Does it matter how it came about?"

"I think it was engineered by Dereath."

Helfer's nose wrinkled. "He was the one who told me about you. Asked if I'd ever seen you passing messages or doing anything suspicious. I said the only messages I'd seen you passing were to the cute guys down at the Jackal's Staff. He's not changed a bit. But still, your wolf is innocent, right? So does it matter if a rat pushed you together?"

"I guess not." Volle rested his muzzle on his paws. "But this rescue all seems a bit too convenient."

Helfer looked pensive, but before he could reply there was a rustle from behind the curtain and it was drawn aside. A small brown rabbit poked his head around the curtain. "Lord Iking? Oh, I'm sorry." He looked at Volle and then back at Helfer.

The weasel smiled. "It's okay, Georgie. Go back to bed; I'll be there in a moment. Wait!" The rabbit had pulled back, and now his head reappeared. Volle saw a bit of his naked hip around the edge of the curtain. "How would you like to be my guest up at my estate in Vellenland for the next few weeks?"

The rabbit's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Yes, really. Go ahead and pack, and we'll leave at first light."

Georgie disappeared without another word. Volle watched him go and then smiled at Helfer. "I see your tastes haven't changed either."

Helfer grinned and shrugged. "He's a fantastic lay. I tell you, Volle, rabbits have more stamina."

Volle closed his eyes again. "I'm not going to argue with you, Hef. I'm too weak."

"How long were you in prison? All this time?"

"All this time. They really didn't tell anyone?"

Helfer shook his head. "I couldn't believe you'd just left. Your rooms were left intact, nothing packed—then they said you were running away. But we never heard anything about prison."

There was a discreet knock at the door. Volle opened his eyes in time to see Helfer glance at him on his way to the door. "That'll be Caresh," he said softly. "Caresh?"

Volle couldn't hear the reply, but obviously it was the valet, because Helfer opened the door. Caresh was a fox, about half a foot shorter than Volle and stocky, but always perfectly groomed. Even woken in the middle of the night, he had

somehow managed to arrange his fur meticulously, and the jacket and pants he was wearing looked freshly pressed. He was carrying a tray with four platters and a small loaf of bread on it, which he set down on the sideboard

Helfer shut the door. "Caresh, nobody is to know that Lord Vinton is here."

"Of course, sir." The valet was clearing off the small table, moving the wine glasses to the sideboard near the bottle. He moved the table over to Volle's left hand side and set the tray down on it

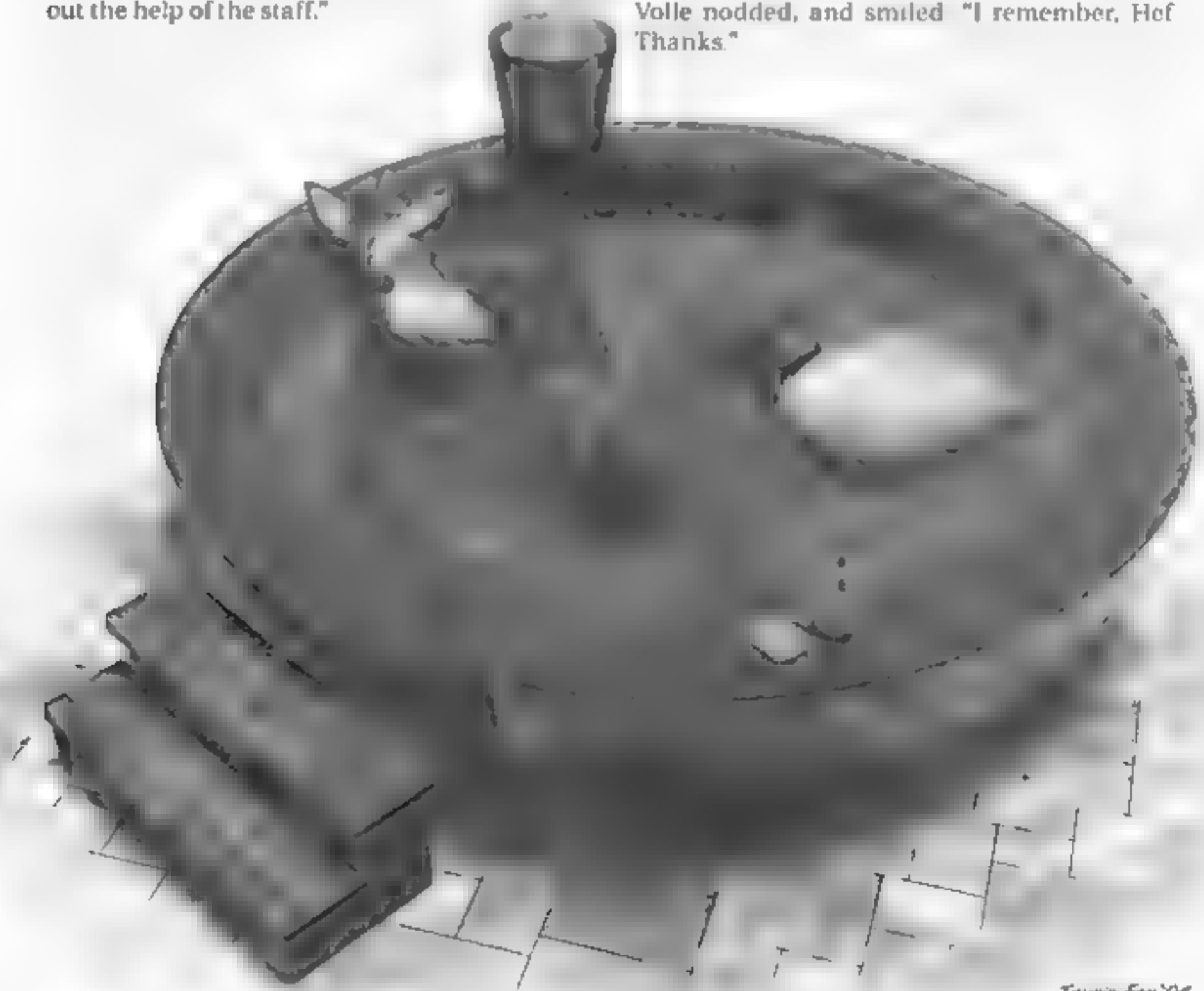
"I do apologize for the quality of the food, sir. The kitchen is closed and I was forced to find what I could without the help of the staff."

"I think that's best," Volle said. His muzzle was already watering at the smells coming from the tray

Caresh lifted the covers from each platter. "Two quails left over from tonight's supper. I believe the sauce is a honey-citrus glaze. Potatoes cooked in the southern Vellenland style with onions and shallots. Beef cubes with gravy. Miss Taffen's celebrated soft rice cake with cinnamon topping. I am sorry, sir, but they were very popular. This was the only one left."

Helfer patted Volle on the shoulder. "I'll leave you to it. Oh, and Volle? Do get out of that outfit. Help yourself to anything in my wardrobe."

Volle nodded, and smiled "I remember, Hof. Thanks."



Taurin Fox '04

Helfer was almost to the curtain when Volle said, "Hef." The weasel turned around.

"I'll stay out of sight when you leave. And I won't be here when you get back. So, good bye, and good luck. Thank you for being a friend."

Helfer walked back over to him and leaned over, giving him a hug. "You too, Volle," he said quietly. "Whatever you're doing, stay safe."

"Can't promise that," Volle grinned weakly. "But I'll try. And maybe someday I will be able to return this very great favor."

Helfer waved a paw. "Don't be silly. Six years of friendship is more than enough. Just keep yourself out of politics from now on. If I've told you once, I've told you a hundred times, it's dull at best and dangerous at worst."

"I'll remember that, Hef. If I get out of here, I'll take your words to heart."

Helfer smiled. "See that you do." He disappeared behind the curtain.

"Will that be all, sir?" Caresh asked.

The platters had given Volle an idea. He lifted the rice cake delicately from the platter it was on and set it on the edge of the potato platter, then landed the empty platter to the valet. "Actually, Caresh, if you would be so kind, there is one small errand I would like you to run. And then I would be very much obliged if you could draw me a water bath."

"Yes, sir."

When Caresh had left, Volle attacked the platters hungrily. He tried to moderate his eating, but both quails and half the potatoes were gone almost before he knew it. The ache in his belly reduced to a grumble, he slowed down and wiped the juices from his muzzle. He'd barely tasted the quail as he bolted it down, but he took more time with the potatoes. They were good, even cold. The bread was slightly stale but still good, and when he'd eaten most of it, he picked up the rice cake and attempted to stand.

His legs were wobbly still, but he felt stronger and was able to make it to the desk, chewing

slowly on the rice cake. Helfer had a cherry-wood writing chair that was nicely carved and comfortable enough. Volle sat down in it gratefully and began searching through the desk.

He found pen and paper easily, but had to search for the ink, and finally located it in a small side drawer. Still chewing on the rice cake (which was delicious), he sat down and began to compose two short letters.

Caresh returned while he was writing. He placed the covered platter on the sideboard beside the desk and waited for Volle to turn around.

"Everything go smoothly, Caresh?"

"Indeed, sir. May I draw your bath now?"

"In a moment." Volle finished one of the notes and folded it over itself twice. "Do you know what happened to my old valet, Welcis?"

"I believe, sir, that Welcis easily found employment with Lord Castor's staff. He was not implicated in your unfortunate predicament."

"I'm very glad to hear that. Would you be so good as to convey this note to him? Not today but when you return from Vellenland."

"Very good, sir."

"Thank you, Caresh. You are a credit both to your species and to your profession."

"One does one's best, sir. May I draw your bath now?"

"Please."

Caresh disappeared behind the curtain, and Volle heard him fire up the small stove. It would take about twenty minutes to get the water bath ready, he estimated, which was plenty of time. He finished the second note and then made his way over to the window and opened one side. For a moment he just stood there, letting the cold air wash over his muzzle, then he leaned carefully out the window.

It was not yet light outside, but there was considerable activity. He looked down onto the street, checking carefully for palace guards in

either direction, then hailed a young mouse who was running by.

"Ho! Mouse!"

The mouse looked up. "Sir?"

"Can you read?"

"No, sir."

Volle waved the second note. "Would you like to earn a silver piece for ten minutes' work?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Take this to the house at .." He gave the mouse an address. "You know where that is?"

"Yes, sir."

"Give it to the person who answers the door. Once they read it, they'll give you a silver piece. Can I count on you?"

"Indeed, sir!" The mouse moved closer to the window and held out his paws.

Volle folded the note over and dropped it from the window. The mouse caught it agilely and waved to Volle, then sprinted away down the street.

Smiling, the fox closed the window. He made it back to the desk and took the papers Caresh had brought back. After checking to make sure they were the right ones, he slipped them into an empty drawer of Helfer's desk. That done, he sat lost in thought until Caresh came to take him to the bath.

He had to lean on the valet to make it through the sitting room behind the curtain. It was a sitting room in name only; Helfer called it his "laying room," or cruder names, if he'd been drinking. The doorway at the far side of the room led to the bedroom, where he slept, and like the doorway back to the parlor it was filled only with a curtain. Helfer didn't like doors much. The two small doors in the left hand wall, which led to his bathroom and wardrobe, were the only ones in the whole suite.

One entire corner of this room was covered with a thick, plush, Vellenland rug. The other far corner was piled high with cushions. Long couches spread against the near wall, both large enough for two (or three, Volle happened to know). Against the right hand wall were two chests, both of finely crafted teak wood.

Volle smiled at the familiar room. Only Helfer could get away with something like this. He didn't have time to linger there, though. The bathroom door was open and the scented steam was calling, and Caresh was bringing him there step by steady step.

The bathroom was filled with curling wisps of steam rising from the large circular stone bath in its center. The stove sat off to one side, filling the room with warmth, but Volle couldn't take his eyes off the bath. Caresh brought him right up to the edge of the tub, and Volle lifted his muzzle to smell the scent in the bathwater. Jasmine, he thought.

"That smells wonderful." Volle put one paw into the water. "Oh. Bless you, Caresh."

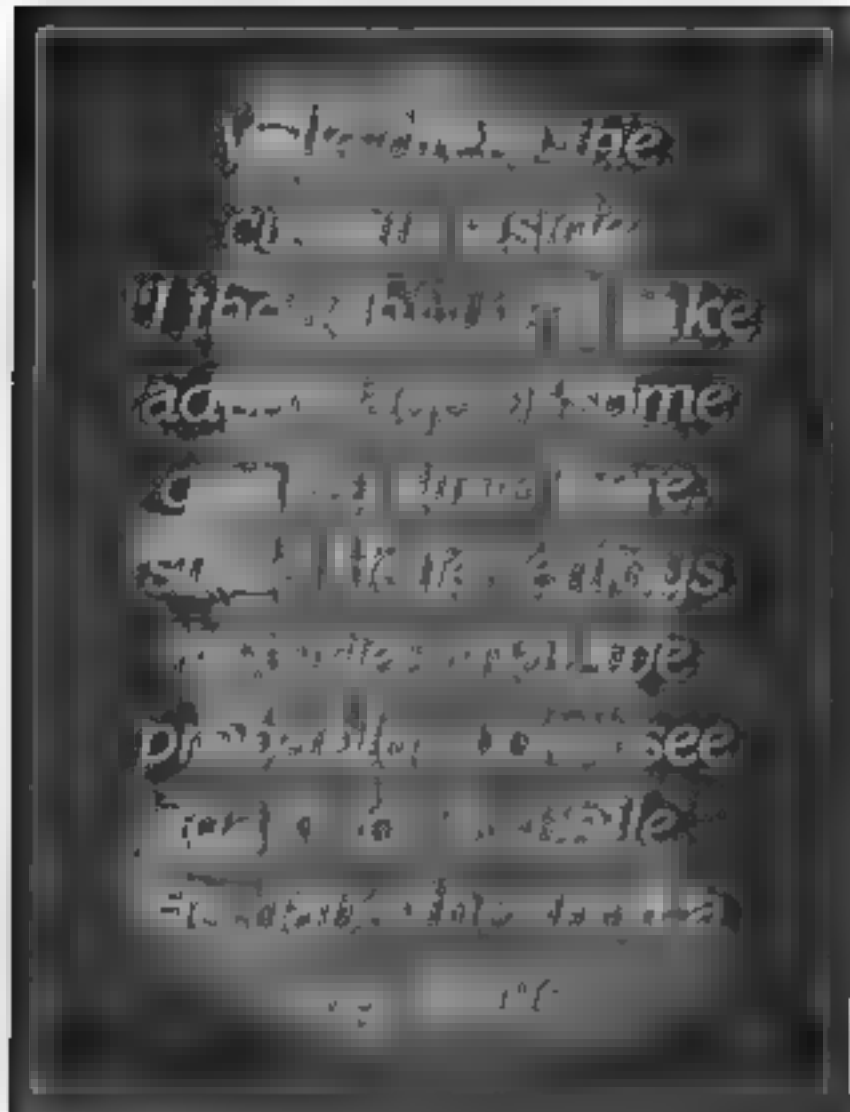
"Thank you, sir." The valet stood by as Volle took off the uniform and sank slowly into the water. "Will that be all?"

"Mmm." Volle's eyes were closed already as the meal and the warmth worked their effect on his starved body. He rested his head on the side of the bath. "Oh, Caresh, when that white wolf comes back, let him in, please?"

Caresh coughed softly. "Sir, are you anticipating his return before our departure?"

"Oh. No. Well, don't let him in, then, I guess." Volle fought to stay awake, but he barely finished his sentence. He didn't hear Caresh leave, or even if the valet made a reply.

When he woke, the water was lukewarm and murky. He could still smell the scent of the bathwater, but it was mingled now with the dirt and grime from the cell. Fortunately, Helfer had soap, so Volle spent a good fifteen minutes making the water even murkier as he scrubbed every inch of his body.



effort. No need to waste his energy here when he had Streak returning tonight.

Standing up was still a bit too unsteady for his liking, though his legs were getting stronger. He settled for kneeling in the bath as the water drained out, agitating it to keep the dirt from setting on his fur. There was still a film of grime on him when the tub was empty, but Caresh had left a bucket of warm water for just that purpose on the tub's edge.

His arms were strong enough to handle the bucket as long as he stretched them back over his head. He poured the water over himself, keeping his eyes shut, and then replaced the bucket. Helfer had a pile of soft towels stacked beside the bath; he grabbed the topmost one and got as much of the water out of his fur as he could. He considered Helfer's grooming powder, but decided against it. It had a nice soft scent, but he knew it was expensive, and he didn't want to use it up.

He poked his head out of the bathroom door. A quick sniff of the air told him that Helfer and his bunny had been through the sitting room and had left already. He held the towel around himself and peeked into the bedroom to be sure. Indeed, Helfer's large feather bed was sitting empty, neatly made with the velvet coverlet on top.

Good. One more thing, then. His legs were getting steadier as he walked around the apartment, and he managed to make it to the desk without holding on to anything. He took out the papers Caresh had brought back the previous night (morning?) and returned to the sitting room.

In the wardrobe, he chose an outfit of short yellow robes over a white shirt. Good traveling clothes. Satisfactorily attired, he concealed the papers and then walked back into the sitting room to wait for Streak.

The knock at the door came in late afternoon. He had been nibbling at the potatoes as he got hungry again, and reading one of the few books Helfer kept in the parlor. At the knock, he stood up, pleased to find that his legs were supporting his weight quite well. Nose to the air, he approached the door. The wolf's scent was there,

His arms were still sore, and unused to stretching down below his chest. He scrubbed the white fur there, then slowly moved down his abdomen. The water helped his muscles adjust, though he was doubly sore when he tried to pull his legs back and stretch his arms down to wash them. His paws were a fright. He didn't think he'd ever get all the dirt out of them. And his poor tail—would it ever be as soft as it had been? He sighed, working another pawful of soap through it.

Lastly, he scrubbed under his tail and then his sheath. He closed his eyes as he did. It had been so long since he'd been able to touch himself. His fingers caressed his sac and rubbed slowly up his sheath's fur, and he didn't stop when he felt a swelling inside. Might as well clean that too, he thought with a grin. His fingers kept rubbing and squeezing in slow, rhythmic strokes, and he felt his cock harden and slide out of his sheath.

He forced himself to wait until it was fully extended. Then he took a pawful of soap and gently rubbed up along his length. The sensation made him shiver in pleasure. He repeated it, enjoying the freedom of movement as much as the stroke itself. When he felt his arousal getting more intense, he stopped, with a little

and nobody else's. With a smile, he opened the door.

Streak returned his smile. "Hi."

"Quick, come in." Volle stepped back, and closed the door after the wolf had come in. He put his arms around the muscular chest and gave Streak a warm kiss. Streak returned the kiss with some passion, but cut it short.

"Is something wrong?"

Streak shook his head. "No. I mean, yes. I was nervous all day today. I thought someone would find out. But when Gerrold raised the alarm, they just sent people out searching. Didn't even ask me to do that."

"Well, that's good." Volle smiled and walked slowly across the parlor, Streak following at his side.

"Say you look good. And smell good. And you're walking!"

Volle spread his arms, showing off his balance. "I feel a lot better."

"I'm so glad to hear that. Listen, Volle, is there anything you need to do? Anyone you need to contact? Cause I can probably get someone to come here without arousing suspicion."

"In a bit." Volle drew the curtain aside. "I thought we'd take advantage of some quality time here, since Helfer enjoys luxuries that we probably won't see again for a while." He gave the wolf a coy smile.

Streak gaped at the sitting room, a bit taken aback. "It would be good to get the business over with first!" The last word became a squeak, as Volle slid his paw into the wolf's pants and found his sheath. He cupped it warmly, rubbing with his fingers, and even slid one claw into the sheath's opening, teasing Streak's cock tip just inside.

"Mm-hmm." Volle said, guiding the wolf to the plush rug. "I plan to take care of business." He grinned and unfastened Streak's pants with his free paw. The other continued rubbing, and

a moment later the wolf had pulled him close and buried him in a deep, passionate kiss.

Volle curled his tongue around the slick, warm wolf tongue, keeping his paw busy. Streak was already mostly erect, and Volle's fingers concentrated on the warm shaft, feeling its smoothness and curling around its volume. His paw pads slid easily along the red flesh, and when they teased at the tip, the wolf gave a little yipping moan into Volle's muzzle. When his paws felt the knot at the base of Streak's shaft start to swell, he stopped, and broke the kiss.

"Mmm. It's so nice to be able to feel you," he said softly, and Streak looked back into his eyes.

"You feel wonderful," he whispered.

"Helfer has some stuff here," Volle said. "Don't move." He left Streak panting, red tongue and red cock hanging out, and went to one of the chests. Inside, he found a small cup full of an oily substance, and removed it.

"Ever used this stuff?"

Streak sniffed it. "Something like it, I think, it's what I think it is." He grinned. "This smells better, though."

"I think it is what you think it is." Volle grinned back. He took two fingertips and dipped them into the cup, then rubbed them up and down along the wolf's erection until it glistened. Streak moaned and squeezed his eyes shut, and then opened them again when Volle took his fingers away.

"And some for you, too?"

"Some for me." Volle lay down on his back, opened the robes, lifted his shirt, and reached into the cup again. He rubbed the oils under his tail, slowly, letting Streak watch as his fingers slipped slightly into himself and back out, smoothing the fur away from the pink opening under his tail. His erection was already visible, and as he lubricated himself it grew fuller, resting against his newly-white belly fur. When he'd done with himself, he rested a paw on his erection, brushing the remaining oils up and down it, and spread his legs.

"Come on," he grinned up at the panting wolf. "You promised, all those weeks ago."

Streak laughed, and moved forward. He slid his paws under Volle's hips and lifted them to meet his own. Volle felt the tip of the wolf's thick shaft for an instant before it slid easily into him. Filling him. He gasped, he'd gotten a bit tighter over the past six months.

"You okay?" Streak was shivering with tension and had moved his paws up to Volle's back, but there was concern in his look too.

"I'm okay." Volle smiled and wiggled his hips. "You're big. And I'm not as easy as I used to be. But I'm okay."

"You do feel tight." Streak nuzzled him gently.

"You feel wonderful." Volle reached up and pulled the wolf closer, pressing his hips forward until he felt the full thick length inside him. Streak gasped and returned his embrace, and for a moment they just lay like that. Then the wolf drew his hips back and pushed them forward, and Volle felt a wave of pleasure course through them both. He brought one paw down to his erection and started stroking himself in time with Streak's thrust. With the other paw, he traced a finger gently up and down the black streak of fur that ran the length of the wolf's supple white hip.

Streak's control didn't last for too long. Volle could feel his knot with every thrust, and as the thrusts got faster and harder he tried to time his own paw's strokes. He shivered every time Streak's length slid past his tail hole, and he knew that the knot stretching him would just about send him over. It was hard to keep his paw from stroking faster; it wanted to. The desire in him was taking over, as it did at the best of times, and like the last time with Streak, he felt that the wolf was a part of it and not just the object of it.

There was a subtle difference in Streak, though. Volle thought he knew what it was. The wolf was thrusting with passion, and yes, love, but also with a touch of guilt. He was trying to restrain it, but as his control eroded and desire took over, the emotions became clearer in his muzzle and in his actions.

Volle observed this with a detached part of his mind and set it aside as he let his passion take him over as well. They moved together, each feeling his own arousal as well as the other's, and when the moment came at last and the wolf's thick knot stretched his tail hole and then popped inside, they both moaned with the same voice.

Volle's muscles squeezed the wolf's knot. Streak's knot stretched the fox's tail hole. The same motion drew them both upward, together, and their shared moans gathered intensity as their bodies gripped each other and shared a dazzling climax. Volle's cock shivered in his paw and covered it with fluid, while inside him, Streak's erection spilled its own fluids. Both pressed close to each other, trembling in the grip of their passion, and then muzzles sought each other out, tongues meeting to hold the moment as long as possible.

Even the afterglow felt special to Volle. He wrapped his legs around Streak's hips and rested his head on a cushion. Streak lay gently atop him and nuzzled quietly, arms tight around him.

"I don't love you because the sex is so good," Volle said softly. "I think the sex is so good because I love you."

Streak nuzzled his ears and said softly, "I love you, too, Volle. I like knowing your name."

"And you think this is the last time we'll be together."

"What?" Streak jerked upright, pulling at Volle's tail hole.

"Ow!"

"Sorry!" He leaned over Volle again. "What do you mean? I'm not leaving you. Unless you want me to."

Volle brushed Streak's muzzle with his clean paw. "It's okay. You're a darling wolf, but you're not all that good at hiding your emotions. And there have been other signs, too. The rescue, the hiding here. It was all too easy."

"What do you mean?" But Streak was looking near tears now. "Don't you trust me?"

"Shh." Volle tried to lift his muzzle to kiss him, but the wolf didn't respond. "They told you that if you got me to give you the papers then... what? You'd get promoted? You'd have me in your personal care? And you were so desperate that you had to try it, but in your heart you don't believe I'll betray my country, do you?"

"I... I didn't."

"I don't blame you, Streak, my sweet young wolf. I know you did it out of love. Or at least compassion. Otherwise you wouldn't be so sad, thinking that at least we had this little time together before they take me back."

A tear dripped onto Volle's chest. "I do love you," Streak whispered. "I don't know how it happened or how they knew. They told me we could go away together as long as they got the papers back."

"They used you," Volle said, reaching up to lick at Streak's muzzle. "They isolated you, kept you friendless, and told you to go do something against your nature. Then they made sure the only person you talked to would be me—a prisoner desperate for companionship and almost as isolated. We were all each other had for that time. And you're gorgeous, and I guess you saw something in me..."

Streak licked him back, another tear dripping down the other side of his muzzle. "How did they know?"

"The chimney hole, I would guess. Listening to everything we said and did."

"Quite astute." The sharp voice came from the doorway.

They both turned their heads to look. A slender rat was standing there, one paw twiddling his whiskers. He was dressed in a simple black outfit, sleeveless vest and pants, with a silver belt. His hairless tail swung idly against the doorframe.

"Dereath." Volle laid his ears back. "I wondered when I'd see you."

"You were supposed to wait outside!" Streak growled.

"Hardly any point to that now, is there?" Dereath smiled at them, a nasty smile that Volle remembered well. "It wasn't hard to figure out what you came in here to do, so when I heard you leave I thought I'd slip in and listen to the show. You perform quite well," he said to Streak. "I think we may have an opening for you. When you're done with that one, that is."

He leered at them, and Streak's growl deepened. "Minister or not, I'll break your muzzle for that."

"Oh, I don't think so, dear boy. Not for another five or ten minutes, at least." He smirked at their joined hips. "And in any case, I'm not stupid enough to come in here alone. Don't worry, the soldiers will stay in the parlor. This show is just for me."

"You said if you got the papers, we could leave together!"

Volle stared at Streak, realizing for the first time what the wolf had meant. He had put his whole career on the line. He'd been willing to give up his livelihood, the only life he knew. Even if he hated it, it was still a significant gesture.

"So I did. But now that he knows you're working for me, I think the probability of that is very slim." Dereath looked at Volle. "Unless this wolf actually means something to you."

"He does," Volle said evenly. "Not that you'd know anything of meaning, you poor excuse for a person. So if I tell you where the papers are, you'll let us go?"

"Of course, Lord Vinton." The rat bowed mockingly. "There is a carriage already ready at the door."

"We've arranged for our own transportation in the street outside," Volle said. "If you don't mind."

"Ah." Dereath straightened, smiling his oily smile. "We would be deeply offended if you chose to forbear our hospitality."

Volle watched the glint in his eyes and hoped Streak could see it too. He had a feeling he knew where Dereath's carriage would be taking them. "Very well." Streak's arms tightened around him. He felt the wolf's knot slip out of him, and the wolf prepared to draw his hips back, but Volle tightened his legs warningly. Streak stopped moving, and Volle didn't think Dereath had noticed.

"Lord Yardley has the papers."

Dereath's expression turned from triumph to puzzlement. "There is no Lord Yardley any more."

"Of course not," Volle said. "Behind his painting in the east wing gallery there is a small concealed space. That's where I hid the plans I stole."

The rat grimaced. "We'll soon see if you're telling the truth. Meanwhile, you can stay here."

He turned and disappeared from the curtain for a moment. They could hear him talking to someone in the parlor, and in that moment Volle let Streak's length slip out of him. He restrained a gasp, and whispered in the wolf's ear, "The wardrobe. First chance we get."

Streak's eyes widened, but he nodded. Volle pulled their hips together to conceal the fact that they were no longer tied, just as Dereath's muzzle reappeared in the curtain. "There are still three soldiers here, in case you're thinking of trying something," he said suspiciously.

"Could you have them fetch us something to eat, leaving you alone and unprotected?" Volle didn't want to take too much time, but he did want to let the rat lower his guard.

"Ha ha." Dereath sneered.

"Could we at least have some privacy to be made presentable before you force him to take me back to prison?"

"Oh, you've got nothing I haven't seen before. Or won't see again," he leered.

Volle shrugged. "Fine." He wiped his belly with his shirt and motioned for Streak to get up. "I

need to change my shirt, though." Deliberately he held his shirt up, giving Dereath a good view of his sheath.

"Mm." The rat was looking at both him and Streak. "Sure, fine."

Volle had to work to keep his tail still as he walked to the wardrobe. At the door, he turned to Streak, who was pulling his pants up. "Wolf? Can you help me pick out one?"

Streak looked at Dereath, but crossed the room before the rat could say "Wait!" He slipped into the wardrobe, and Volle closed the door behind them both. He slid the bolt and walked to the back.

"Why does Helfer have a lock on his wardrobe? And what does this gain us?" Streak fastened his pants and followed Volle to the back of the wardrobe.

"I figure we have about five minutes," Volle said, fingers running over the stonework at the back of the wardrobe. "Ah, here it is." He pressed on a stone about seven feet off the ground. There was a sharp click, and a section of the wall swung inward, revealing a dark passageway. The air inside was chill and dank, and smelled of mildew and rot.

Volle stepped into the passage. He held out a paw to Streak. "Coming?"

The wolf's eyes lit up. He bounded into the passage, almost knocking Volle over, and swept him up in a tight hug.

"Hey!" Volle laughed softly. "Careful! We need to get that closed. See the handle there? Pull it closed with that."

Streak licked the fox's muzzle and set him down carefully. He pulled the door closed with a satisfying click. Volle thought it was one of the sweetest sounds he'd ever heard.

The passageway went only a short distance before ending in a ladder. They climbed down a long ways, and at the bottom, Volle's arms hurt again. Only then did he feel it was safe to talk.

"Helfer used this passage to get himself and me in and out. So he wouldn't have to bother with security when he wanted to bring uninvited guests back—usually I only used it a handful of times."

"Pretty lucky that you knew about that," Streak said. Volle grinned back at him. The passage wasn't quite wide enough for two, but Streak was walking close behind him. The wolf seemed to have a bounce in his step again, and his tail was wagging.

"I'm sure there are several other ways into and out of the castle," Volle knew of two others for certain. "I'm lucky that I got to know Hef well enough that he trusted me with this one."

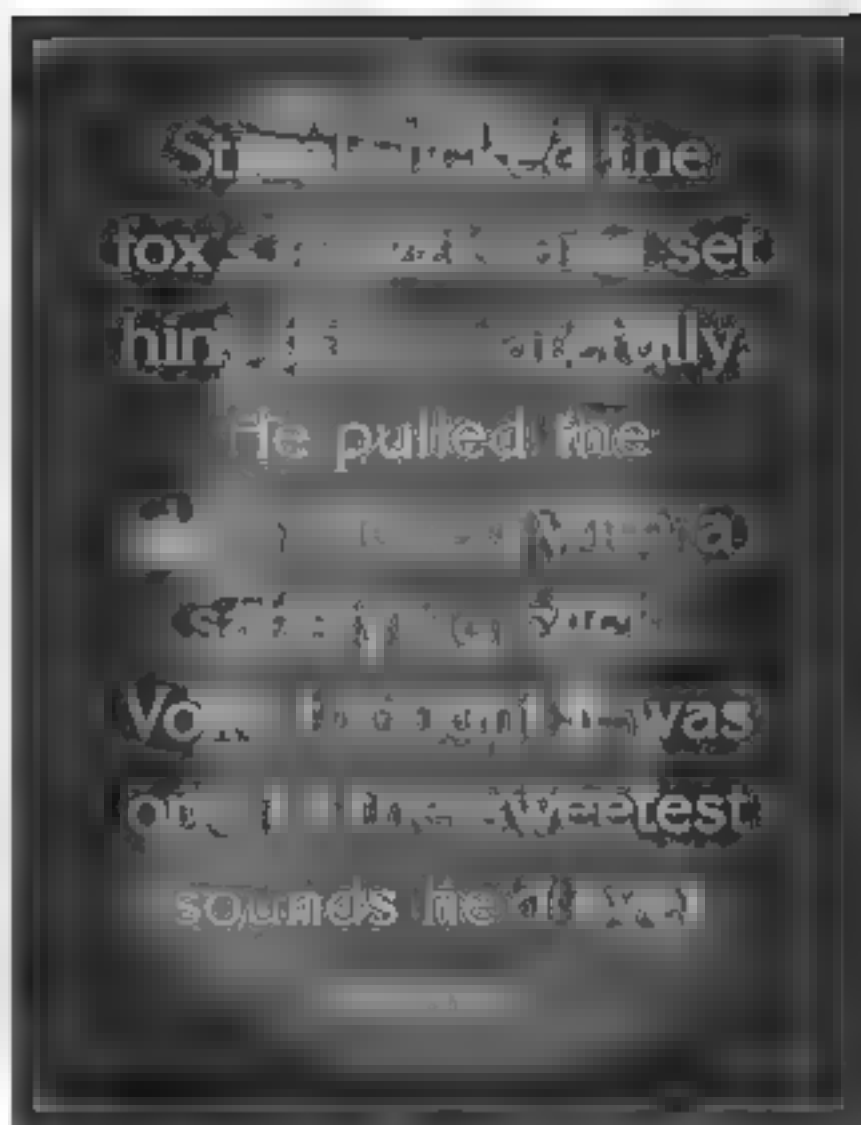
At the end of the passage, Volle listened at the wooden door, then opened it slowly. They emerged into a dark cellar full of barrels and crates. A line of light at the far end indicated where the stairs to the street were and gave them enough light to see that the cellar was deserted. Volle closed the door, which seemed to merge with the paneling of the cellar. He followed Streak across the cellar toward the stairs.

"You took your sweet time." Seir hopped off a crate and walked toward them. She looked exactly as Volle remembered her—half his height, thin and wiry, with a nondescript tunic tied with a length of rope around her waist. He remembered the scar in her left ear that she wouldn't tell anyone the origin of. He remembered the swing of her tail. And he remembered the way her eyes could look soft and hard at the same time, as they did now.

Streak growled and bared his teeth, but Volle waved him off. "Seir's a friend of mine," he said. "You got the plans okay?"

"Safe and sound and on their way home. And so should we be." She stood a foot away from him, arms planted on her tiny hips. "We were so worried, Volle. When I got your note..."

He stepped forward and hugged her, and she threw her arms around him. "It's okay now," he said. "Long as you can get us home."



"Us, eh?" She eyed Streak warily, stepping back from Volle. "I don't know him."

Volle took Streak's paw. "He saved my life."

"Uh-huh. And more than that. I can still smell you know." Seir nodded curtly to Streak. "Sorry. This one has a tendency to think with his cock sometimes."

Volle's ears flattened in embarrassment, but Streak just smiled politely. "We found that we do think a lot alike."

Seir chuckled, and walked over to Streak, examining him up close. "Well, we'll have a good long time to get to know each other. It's a week and a half to the border, and we won't dare show our muzzles outside the carriage most of the way."

"The border?" Streak's paw tightened around Volle's.

"You don't have to go if you don't want to," Volle squeezed back. "I won't ask you to do anything against your country."

Seir looked back and forth, and stepped back. "So, ah, let me go get the carriage. Back in five."

Don't go anywhere." She climbed up the stairs and slipped out the door, letting a brief burst of evening air and light into the room.

"You already gave her the papers?" Streak said, not letting go of Volle's paw.

"Afraid so. I told the truth about the portrait, but I had a friend get the papers early this morning." He chuckled. "I fear old Dereath is in for a number of disappointments."

Streak wasn't smiling. "So...you could've escaped any time today."

"I...well, I guess so."

"But you stayed. For me?" Streak's voice had dropped to a whisper.

"You didn't think I'd run off without you, did you? Not after all you did for me."

"You knew I was betraying you and you still stayed for me?" Streak was sniffing back tears now.

Volle stepped forward and pulled the big wolf into his arms. "Of course I did, you silly. Because I knew you were doing it out of love. And I thought I had a pretty good chance of getting you away from Dereath. I mean, his tail isn't nearly as nice as mine."

Streak's composure broke, and his body shook with half-laughs, half-sobs. "No, your tail is much, much nicer." Volle held on to him and nuzzled gently. He nuzzled back, and then they were sharing a kiss again, and that's how Seir found them.

"Break it up, you two." She grinned. "Plenty of time for that on the way back."

They sat together in the carriage, with the shades drawn until it was safely outside the town limits. Volle leaned against Streak, who put an arm around him, and Seir smiled from the opposite seat. For a while, none of them spoke. Streak rubbed Volle's chest through his shirt, and Volle rested a paw on the wolf's pants.

"What are you going to do when we get back?" Seir said as the carriage turned a corner. "They might want you to stay on as an advisor."

Volle's tail swung lazily back and forth, brushing Streak's leg and foot. "I just spent five or six months in prison. I don't think I feel much like doing anything at the moment. Maybe I could get a minor estate somewhere in the country. Though I don't really know anything about farming." He tilted his head back and smiled up at the wolf.

"Mmm," Streak said, brushing a paw gently over his muzzle. "I think I know someone who might be able to show you a few things."

"Really? What's his name?" Volle grinned.

The wolf leaned over and kissed his nose. "You can call him 'Streak.' He likes that just fine."





Ever since the first issue of *Heat* returned from the printer, I've been pestering Jeff with ideas for making the magazine better. "You know, you could have done this to make these images really stand out." "If you'd have changed that, it would have been really awesome." "In the next issue, you ought to try doing this." I think he tired of listening to me tell him how to do his job, because eventually he said, "Those are all terrific ideas! You're hired!" I probably would have squealed in excitement like Buck in Disney's *Home On The Range* if I could reach that octave. I've been fascinated by Jeff's concept for the magazine ever since I first heard him describe it, and being handed the editorial pen was more than I could have hoped for. *Heat* is a much appreciated creative outlet and alternative from my mundane daily activities. Many thanks to Jeff for entrusting me with this project!

I would also like to extend my thanks to the writers and artists who contributed to this issue. They were all easy to work with and kept everything moving along on schedule. To be honest, I was expecting more challenges: comma wars with writers, quirky artists' work schedules, technical glitches. But the writers were all happy to discuss my suggestions for changes without taking things personally; the comic artists were open to changes in design and dialog; and the illustrators not only created marvelous images to compliment the stories and poetry, but they also met our accelerated deadlines without complaint!

Many thanks also go to you, our readers, because without you it would be much harder to justify the time and effort we put into Sofawolf Press. Your ideas and stories are what allow us to continue to put out issues of our magazines on a regular basis. Please keep them coming! With *Heat* we are especially interested in your ideas for how this magazine can continue to grow and evolve into something special, challenging assumptions, surprising expectations, and subverting the dominant paradigm.

Your patronage is also greatly appreciated. Without your purchases we wouldn't be able to afford to develop exciting new projects. In early 2005 you can look forward to the release of the first of two novels by Kyell Gold: *Volle*, the story of the eponymous fox's arrival in Tephos, where he would eventually be imprisoned in *The Prisoner's Release*. We are also expanding into graphic novels with a comprehensive two-part publication of John Nunnemacher's *Buffalo Wings*. These projects and more would not be possible without your faithful support. Good dog! Have a biscuit!

HEAT

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Animal Magnetism

squirrel

velvet

pink

nasty

fetch

probe nose here
musk y love puppy

big slow paw job
nuzzle drip y pup bone
crave liquid pleasure

I lust for you with animal love
my need to mount your body throbs fiercely

soft belly fur to thick beautiful tail
breath trembles burning hot and hard

growling heavily I tease my cock
to your warm beautiful behind

I embrace and plunge my canine rod in and out
penetrating inside your sexy luscious bottom

tongue showing panting frantically as my passion
fills your exquisite pleasing behind

I devour you on every hump grind and pound
and unleash my raw fiery sex upon you

enormous knob of dog shaft fully swollen
tightly swallowed & bound by hungry wet canal

orgasm

spurt

ecstasy

relax

cuddle

pretty
fly
for
a
kennel
girl
!

